



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK

**Aalborg Universitet**

## **Reflexive Management**

*System-theoretical reflection on reflection*

Rennison, Betina Wolfgang

*Published in:*  
Journal of Leadership and Management

*Publication date:*  
2015

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Rennison, B. W. (2015). Reflexive Management: System-theoretical reflection on reflection. *Journal of Leadership and Management*, 1(3), 27-36.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Cabell's Listed

# REFLEXIVE MANAGEMENT: SYSTEM-THEORETICAL REFLECTION ON REFLECTION

**Betina Wolfgang Rennison**

Department of Social Studies and Organization  
Aalborg University, Denmark

---

## ABSTRACT

Managers do not only take action. They are continually required to reflect upon that action. It seems obvious, but what does it mean to reflect? Can we develop a theoretical model for how it can be done or at least how we can come to terms with the concept of reflection in relation to management? This article makes an attempt. Inspired by the system theory of Niklas Luhmann, the article elaborates and develops four different modes or steps of reflection; Construction (pre-reflection), Reconstruction (reflection of first order), Deconstruction (reflection of second order) and Transformation (reflection of third order). The ambition is to create an analytical framework from which we can study and practice the reflection processes of management. At the same time paying attention to the critical aspects of the reflexive regime and thereby, the article ends up with a call to continually keep on reflecting upon reflection.

**KEYWORDS:** reflection, leadership, learning, management, system theory, Niklas, Luhmann

---

### Correspondence address:

Betina Wolfgang Rennison, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Department of Social Studies and Organization  
Kroghstræde 7, 9220 Aalborg Ø, Denmark  
e-mail: [bwr@socsci.aau.dk](mailto:bwr@socsci.aau.dk)

### Article info:

Available online: 23 March 2015  
Editor: Adam Szpaderski

### Journal information:

©2015 Published by Institute  
of Leadership in Management Inc.  
Journal homepage:  
[www.leadership.net.pl](http://www.leadership.net.pl)

---

## 1. Introduction: Causes of reflection

Since the Enlightenment, we have pursued its ideal of “*Sapere aude*”: “Dare to think”. Nowadays we all are expected to be reflexive individuals who not simply act but continually think about the way we act. Thus, in many management training programs, managers are trained to become “reflective practitioners” who can go into “meta-mode”, analyze and critically evaluate their own practices before, during and after – in order to constructively disrupt and change their practices and identities all along.

Why is reflection so seemingly relevant in today’s management? What does reflection at all mean? And which blind spots or critical consequences does the regime of reflection imply? Those questions concern and structure this article. Firstly defining some *causes* of reflection, secondly offering a theoretical model of the *content* of reflection and thirdly discussing the *challenges* of reflection. Let us begin with the causes: To what problems is reflection the solution? I would suggest five such problems:

First, *complexity*: modern organizations are often tasked with managing “wicked problems”, i.e. socially, politically and technically complex tasks that cannot be formulated and definitively solved with uniform ends and means. Hence, there is a need for a reflexive management that can understand and manage complexity and provide for an open and exploratory problem-solving process.

Second, *cacophony*: in a complex organization, there are many factors to consider. Different value orientations, rationales or “codes” often clash: change vs. stability, quality vs. economic efficiency, control vs. trust, individual vs. collective etc. The dilemma becomes a permanent condition of management. It requires a reflexive management that can create a polyphony from the cacophony, that can rise above the deafening noise of voices, distinguish the different voices from each other, orchestrate plurality and manage paradoxes by continually regulating and prioritizing ideas on the basis of well-considered deliberation and thoughtfulness.

Third, *capability*: in a performance-driven production

culture, both public and private companies, managers and employees are assessed by their results and their ability to perform. And the expectation is that the capability persistently increases as we in a time of crisis are required to do more with less. In a strong results- and impact-oriented company-culture, we must be able to calculate and account for how, why and when we do what we do, and with what consequences. Only in this way can the capability help to ensure continued growth. The hope seems to be that reflection leads to better actions – actions that result in more optimal fulfillment of goals – and to cheaper and better problem solving.

Fourth, *contingency*: reflexive management is needed in a world where speed replaces duration, where nothing is certain and where in principle, everything is possible. Where knowledge is impermanent and where everything that seems stable; the organization, the service, the staff, the customer/user segment etc. constantly can change. It is a task of reflexive management never to stiffen into a particular form – to always unlearn, re-learn, dissolve and recreate ourselves. A reflexive management is a risk-willing management that has the courage to think differently, and which is receptive to innovative transcendances of the familiar and wondrous discoveries of the unknown.

Fifth, *calendar time*: in the era of high speed and in today's busy just-in-time operations, it is difficult, but essential to stop and think an extra moment so that errors can be avoided and innovative development ensured. A pause for reflection is needed in the midst of the bustle. We need a moment where production is halted, the here-and-now decisions are put on hold and the urge to act is kept at bay for a while. Reflexive management is one of the answers to the frequently sought need for more time for management – not just time to manage and lead, but time to think about how to manage and lead.

Thus, my initial diagnosis, the five Cs; complexity, capability, cacophony, contingency, calendar time, all cry out for the same cure: reflection. So what is reflection, then? There are many answers, so let us first draw on this definition of reflection: “a complex activity aimed at investigating one's own action in a certain situation and involving a review of the experience, an analysis of causes and effects, and the drawing of conclusions concerning future action, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective” (Woerkom 2003: 40 in Høyrup and Elkjaer 2006: 31, translation by Betina Wolfgang Rennison).

Reflection is the analytical ability, in time and space, to put one's thoughts, speech and actions into perspective by

imagining alternative positions, inviting “the otherness” in, and thereby creating new and expanded opportunities for thinking, speaking and acting. Reflection is “the process through which a system establishes a relationship with itself”, as Niklas Luhmann puts it (Luhmann 1982: 327). Reflection is to take a meta position and create a present distance to existing routines, frames, directions, fields, results and relations, in order to potentially reformulate them in a new way. Reflection's retrospection and overview allow us to see and realize what we have done, why, how and with what consequences. Reflection's breadth of vision and foresight enable us to be able to mentally test alternatives and navigate towards an imagined future.

## 2. Theoretical model

### 2.1. Concept of reflection

In order to grasp the concept of reflection in a management context, this article describes it in terms of four dimensions; the dimension are related to the manager's ability to:

1. act and create herself as a manager (construction),
2. observe and reflect on how to think and act (reconstruction),
3. reflect on this self-observation (deconstruction),
4. with this tripartite process of construction, reconstruction and deconstruction, to acquire a solid reflective capacity which, as an embedded ability to learn to learn, ensures continued change in the managers way of doing management (transformation).

The four ideal-typical dimensions, orders or levels of reflection are inspired by Niklas Luhmann's sociological systems theory (e.g. Luhmann 2000: 507ff)<sup>1</sup> and learning theoretical insights from classics such as Dreyfus, Bateson, Schön, Argyris and Mezirow. Note that my theoretical application is eclectic and pragmatic rather than theoretically dogmatic. The primary purpose and contribution of this article is twofold; 1. *Practically*; to delineate a cognitive map for the manager to be inspired of and to navigate by in his or hers reflexive work on management. We command our leaders to be reflexive in their daily work but we seldom offer them a model of understanding reflexivity and invite them to reflect about the concept of reflection. It is

1. Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) was German professor of sociology and one of the founding fathers of the modern sociological system theory. One of his most famous works *Soziale Systeme* (1984) describes the modern society in terms of self-regulated and self-refereeing systems; i.e. autopoietic systems. Luhmann comprehend the human world in relation to different forms of autopoietic systems; *psychic systems* operating in the meaning-media of consciousness and *social systems* operating in the meaning-media of communication and differentiated in three; interaction systems, organizational systems and functional systems; e.g. the legal, political, economic, scientific, educational, intimate, religious, art, health etc. system (see e.g. Rennison 2007).

the ambition of this article to do so. 2. *Theoretically*; to reduce the complexity and integrate different theoretical concepts about reflection and learning and thereby highlight the similarities we often dismiss in the academic efforts of distinguish ourselves and criticize others. Even though the mainframe is informed by systemtheory, which often is accused of being weird in its turning everything into systems (even humans!), this article want to minimize the weirdness in showing that the system theoretical concept of observation and reflection corresponds quite well with classical theories of learning. The added value though is the system theoretically strength in pinpointing the overall difficulty of learning, of thinking out-of-the box, due to the autopoietic (i.e. self-producing) nature of all systems; be it the manager as a psychic system or management as a social system. Reflexivity, and learning in that respect, is a hard case as systems are most likely to keep on reproducing and repeating themselves in relation to their own well-known elements. That is a theoretical premise which can be useful in our understanding and practice of reflecting on and changing management.

## 2.2. Construction: Zero-level of reflection

In the dimension of construction, management is nothing more than the act of doing. The manager manages; formulates the budget, carries out the career development assessments, gives professional feedback, puts out “fires”, etc.). The manager does not think about how this is done – she just operates and simply exists. Expressed in system theoretical terms, this is the level of self-producing (autopoietic) reproduction, where the system produces itself from itself in repeating loops. The management system does what it usually does. It acts and communicates on the basis of schemes of meaning, action templates and communicative codes that it is accustomed to operate within. It traverses the same path of experience again and again. Things are well known and quite secure, and in this way one can absorb uncertainty, which is management’s essential function in an organization. A firmly established knowledge- and experience capital makes possible an intuitive and experienced behavioural practice. Action is carried out on the basis of reflex, not reflection. There is no distancing from a given problem – you stand in the middle of it – and act in the habitual way. To reflect further seems unnecessarily disruptive. To act according to the well-known ideas and habitual know-how brings rhythm, stability and flow to the managerial work. Donald Schön call this “Knowledge-in-action” (Schön 2001: 52-55). Schön speaks of this as: “Strategies, understanding of phenomena and approaches to outline a task or problem that is

appropriate to the situation. Knowledge-in-action is silent, spontaneous and is conveyed without conscious considerations” (Schön 2000: 259, translation by Betina Wolfgang Rennison).

“Arational action” is the Dreyfus’ brother’s term for this. An arational action is neither rational nor irrational, but an “action without conscious analytical decomposition and recombination” (Dreyfus 1986: 36 in Wahlgren 2002: 116). There is arational action when a point of departure is taken spontaneously and automatically out of one’s own experiential repertoire. When we do what seems obvious to us and do what normally and usually works. In terms of system theory, there is a *basal self-reference* at stake; the system refers exclusively to itself; it is bound by its own logic, its own secure knowledge, its proper element. Criticism is not allowed – others’ views of the system are viewed solely as noise or undue interference. It is about ensuring its own existence by holding on to its own values and ignoring the values of the outside world. We might call it unreflective self-centeredness.

In this pre-reflexive dimension, the external complexity is kept out. Without such operational closure, the management system would become complex and uncertain; it would not be able to act and to take the necessary decisions. Fortunately, then, for this ability. But at this “zero level of learning”, as Gregory Bateson calls it (Bateson 2000), there occurs no learning, no reflection. There develops a foundation for reflection through the automated learning and building up of qualifications. However, if the management system is to show greater cognitive openness and potentially change, it must move from the operational level to the reflexive levels.

## 2.3. Reconstruction: First-order level of reflection

In the reconstruction dimension, or first-order reflection, the management system is able not only to act and manage, but also to think about how this acting in management is done. In Schön’s terminology, the operational “knowledge-in-action” is accompanied by a simultaneous “reflection-in-action” and/or “reflection-over-action” (Schön 2000, 2001: 60-72). Thus, the system is able to observe itself, to consider the elements or events, of which it consists of and the relations between them and thus manage the system-internal complexity and learn from this. The learning that comes out of this self-observation is not based on a transfer of meaning from the outside, but on pre-existing conditions. As noted by a Luhmann-inspired

Danish Professor: “Learning is an individual or organization’s acquisition of knowledge elements through, with and in dynamic interaction with the cognitive schemas that the individual or the organization already possesses” (Qvortrup 2008: 110, translation by Betina Wolfgang Rennison).

At this first-order level there occurs, in Jack Merizow’s terms, a “reflection of content”, where we reflect on the basis of what we perceive, think, feel, or act – generally and/or in a specific situation. There also occurs a “reflection of process” where we reflect on how we perform the (management) action, the methods and problem-solving strategies used, and how the process takes form and is carried out (Wahlgren et al. 2002: 163 with reference to Mezirow 1991: 107f).

In terms of system theory, we move from the basal self-reference to a so-called *processual self-reference* (what Luhmann also calls “reflexivity”), where the system, on the basis of a procedural before/after distinction, reflects upon what has happened. The management system reconstructs its way of constructing its management, in order to raise self-knowledge and obtain insight into the way it has been done or is typically done. For example: “Well, now I can see that I typically manage within a financial and operationally-oriented frame of reference.” In the processual self-reference, we observe ourselves – and to observe means to indicate something within the frame of a difference (Spencer-Brown 1969: 1); for example, economic orientation versus non-economic orientation. We prefer something rather than something else, or in system theoretical terms, we mark something in a specific way and allow other things to go unmarked. The reconstructive processes and accompanying changes proceed according to what we can currently accept and generally find meaningful. We ignore what is outside the scope of this context of meaning (the unmarked). To see is also to disregard. All observation is based on a blind spot, namely precisely the gaze one sees with (e.g. the economic). A system (e.g. the manager as psychic system) sees only what makes sense to it, and that which the system then sees is interpreted in the light of the system’s own logic (in an economic logic everything turns into a question of resource optimization and utility calculation). The external impulses that are brought in are re-coded and can in the system assume a totally different character (also known as “black-box observation”). One example is when the manager, on the basis of an economic perspective, misreads and creatively misunderstands co-creation processes involving citizens/customers as an exclusively optimization and savings instrument rather than as a democratic and quality improvement element.

At this first order level of reflection or observation, the system is still self-centered. The management system orients itself according to a mono-contextual perception of reality: it sees what it sees and nothing else. It cannot see that it cannot see what it cannot see. The learning potential is limited to an internal expansion of its own knowledge- and meaning horizon – to “dynamisation of internal self-references”, as Qvortrup calls it (Qvortrup 2008: 111). In terms of learning theory, the learning here is “single-loop learning” (cf. Chris Argyris) or an expression of an “exploitation strategy” (cf. James March), where adjustments are made in actions, where errors and omissions are corrected, existing knowledge calibrated, routines are refined and further developed from already applied approaches and techniques. All together on the basis of a self-validating idea. The economically-oriented manager, for example, continues to lead within this medium, but refines the economic rationale and extends its methods. It is a case of learning where one becomes better at what you are already good at – one’s factual and situated knowledge is increased (cf. Bateson’s Level I and II learning) and changes take place in some instrumental strategies but not in the values which lie behind these. “How...” questions are asked rather than “Why...” questions. It is “assimilative” learning (cf. Jean Piaget) or “conformative” learning (see Mezirow), where new knowledge and impressions from the outside world are fitted into existing structures of meaning in an additive rather than transcending learning process. The basic assumptions are not changed. Through this procedural self-reference, the system of management is thus able to learn and change conditions by itself without putting its identity at risk. A first order reflection is an instrumental reflection, characterized by the Danish professor Steen Wackerhausen as: “A problem-solving reflection in which thinking uses the customary and traditional concepts, etc., and where the basis of thinking is the traditional perspectives of habit, etc. A reflection which to a much greater extent (if not exclusively) is custom-affirming rather than custom-challenging; a reflection where the established conceptual resources, perspectives and space of action for the practice field are not up for discussion” (Wackerhausen 2008:16, translation by Betina Wolfgang Rennison).

In order for this kind of management system to function, it must close in around its own sense of meaning; otherwise it becomes overloaded by uncertainty. But it must also be open to outside inputs; otherwise it dies of asphyxiation. In other words, it must move from first order instrumental reflection to second-order, deconstructive reflection.

## 2.4. Deconstruction: Second-order level of reflection

While the management system in the reconstruction dimension shifts the focus from *what* management does to observe *how* management is done, the focus in the deconstruction dimension is on *why* management is done, or rather, which criteria underlie the observation and reconstruction of management. Which overarching framework is used to reflect upon management? At the deconstruction level, the management system supplements the immediate self-reflection (first-order reflection) with reflection on themselves as reflexive (second-order reflection). The system thinks about how it thinks about what it does. It is brought into a position where it can see that there is something it cannot see. From this second-order level, we can see the blind spots in the first-order level. It is possible to draw some logical conclusions back (Gr. “reflectere” = bend back) to our own boundaries and reflect upon whether “the not yet seen” – the excluded potential – should/can be become actual. The moment of observation is now turned toward the unmarked side of the marked/unmarked difference. As a meaning-based system, management always thinks within a given horizon of opinion and knowledge, but at the same time also about how this horizon may be transcended. This is where the economically-oriented manager some way or the other realizes the limitations of economy and supplements it with other forms of orientation (Andersen 1999: 112, Kneer and Nassehi 1998: 101f., Qvortrup 2008: 94, Thyssen 1992: 38).

In a second-order reflection, management relates critically to its own management construction and reconstruction. Doubt is cast on the proper way to manage: to think, speak and act. The system thinks beyond itself by considering and rethinking the vantage point from which it observes the world. Could things be different? The system asks challenging questions of its own practice’s tacit premises and deconstructs the accepted truths in the values and beliefs that it uses and takes for granted. In the second order reflection, we move beyond reflection over content and process and instead adopt what Mezirow calls a “reflection of premises”, where the basic assumptions are problematized and questions asked as to the basis and of the pre-understandings, on which a given problem is based: “Why have we understood the problem in this way? Has it been a useful way to understand it? What assumptions underlie the understanding?” (Wahlgren et al. 2002: 163, referring to Mezirow 1991: 108f). Such a reflection on premises is not only reflection but *critical* reflection. Critical reflection is a test of the validity of the premises – we take a step back from our assumptions and assess their ro-

bustness; we reassess the form in which we typically raise problems – and of our general way of “experiencing, comprehending, knowing, believing, feeling and acting” (Mezirow 2000: 77, translation by Betina Wolfgang Rennison). There occurs what Argyris calls “double-loop learning” or what March has called “exploration”; a process whereby the management system examines and restructures the values and criteria of what defines good management practice. A pathway is open to receive alternatives. As the Danish learning consultant Per Schaarup points out, the task of this reflective level is “to ensure that communication is supplied with adequate disturbances, well-dispersed foreign elements and fineother-nesses, in an appropriately irreverent way.” (Schaarup 2008: 179, translation by Betina Wolfgang Rennison).

This reflective dimension represents a poly-contextual perception of reality: the management system has an eye for several meaningful contexts, different notions of reality, for alternative forms of observation, thinking and acting. Here management becomes an exchange between normative closure and cognitive openness, between a self-critical look at the system’s reason that is currently in force, and a curious eye towards possible alternatives. At the level of second-order reflection, the management system opens itself up to the outside world and adds other system-logics into its independent formation of opinion and decision-making. The self-reference incorporates a foreign reference, and let itself be complemented by an external reference: a reference to something different from the referring self (Esposito, 1996: 271). This allows for openness toward otherness. An openness which in terms of learning theory invites to a so-called accommodative learning (cf. Piaget), transformative learning (cf. Mezirow) or level III learning (cf. Bateson) – a transcending and re-learning process of learning. Mezirow defines transformative learning thusly: “Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform the frames of reference we take for granted (our meaning perspectives, habits of understanding, forms of thought) so as to make them more comprehensive, insightful, open, respectful and emotionally flexible so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified in relation to guiding actions.” (Mezirow 2005: 91, translation by Betina Wolfgang Rennison).

Through the critical reflections’ creation of deconstruction, creative disturbance and transcending learning the management system move beyond its own boundaries and make it self unstable. But by opening up new perspectives and positions, it recaptures its stability at a higher, more complex and potentially richer level. This is the point of the second-order reflection.

## 2.5. Transformation: Third-order level of reflection

Just as I continuously have done above, in this section I again change the object: first there was the focus on the management operation itself (O order reflection), then on the observation of the management operation (1<sup>st</sup> order reflection), then the observation of this observation (2<sup>nd</sup> order reflection). Now the focus moves to the particular methodology or reflection culture, which as an overall or supportive framework enables management to re- and de-construct itself – which I call the third-order reflection. In this dimension, the reflexive management task lies in designing, reaffirming and internalizing the reflection as a methodological strategy for self-formation and transformation. This dimension of reflection consists of two parts; *design*, i.e. the planning of and form of the concrete process of reflection, and *desire*, i.e. the binding commitment to reflection as a method or regime of transformation.

### 2.5.1. Design

Reflexive management is not only about reflecting but also about constructing a favorable environment for both organizational and individual reflection (cf. Bateson's level IV learning). As design parameters, I list the following W-questions that the reflexive management can ask itself in the design of a concrete reflective event.

- *What*: What is it that is reflected upon? (reflection's *content*): What problem/issue/theme is the object of reflection?
- *Where*: From where does the reflection originate? (reflection's *perspective*): Within which frames of reference, value orientations, conceptual worlds, knowledge- and meaning horizons are the reflection positioned?
- *Why*: Why does the reflection take place? (reflection's *initiator*): What are the motives behind it?; pressure of expectations?, forced changes?, dilemma-filled disorientations?, frustration and inadequacy?, fascination and curiosity?, future visions and dreams? And what is the reflection intended to achieve?
- *When*: When does reflection occur? (reflection's *time*): At what time/period does the reflection take place? Before, during and/or after a given thought, speech and action? As a "reflection-in-action", in which the reflection occurs in temporal association with the moment of action, in reflective conversation with the situation, in direct interaction with the environment

so that we can experiment on site and reshape what we do while we do it? (e.g. Schön 2000: 258f, 2001: 60-72). Or as "reflection-over-action", in which the reflection occurs in a subsequent time gap, in a reflective space without compulsion to act, reserved for the evaluation and re-evaluation of the completed/future actions? (e.g. Mezirow 2000: 77).

- *Who*: Who reflects? (reflection's *sociality*): Is the reflection an individual matter, an inner process of acquisition and an isolated solo performance for the individual manager where the manager constantly learns more about herself and her surroundings? And/or a collective interaction, a dialogical process in a relational, reflecting community of practice where diverse experiences and perspectives are exchanged? When is which form pursued?
- *How*: How does the reflection take place? (reflection's *methodology*): What specific means and methods are used? Be those formal methods such as evaluation and self-assessment technologies, logbooks, individual coaches, internal/external manager networks, management training, reflexive teams or methods of testimony. Or more informal types of reflection such as daily collective reflections in the work process itself ("productive reflection", cf. Docherty, Boud and Cressey 2006). Or the reflection that take place during the lunch break, in the copy room, around the coffee machine, at the company outing, etc.? In the design of the reflexive methodology, the key is to allow time for reflection (through formalized activities away from everyday life) while at the same time avoiding that it becomes an artificial design based on reflection-on-demand: 1-2-3: Reflect! – detached from the practice that the reflection aims at, and from the everyday and specific situation which typically actualizes it.

With all these questions in mind, reflective management is connected with a reflection about what it covers, from where the framework is set, why it is made relevant, when it is practiced, who performs it and how it concretely takes place. This framing is obviously essential for the existence and consistency of the reflective event. Of course being totally aware of the difficulties this might bring, noting the system theoretical point: No system can control or design the operations and observations of other systems – it only can bring disturbance to them and just hope for them to get the point and allowing themselves to change.

## 2.5.2. Desire

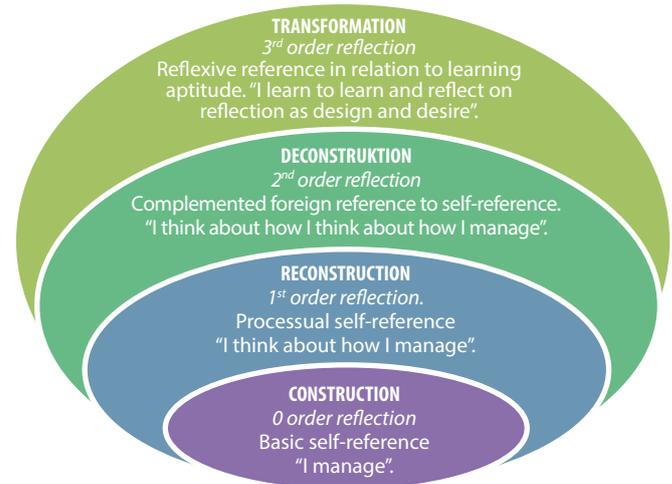
Thus, design or the attempt of designing the process of reflection is not enough. Reflective management is not just a project with a design and a deadline, but a persistent value, an institutionalized culture and internalized desire. A basic condition for reflective management is that the manager (and other reflective subjects) takes the credo of reflection; the continued development and reformulation of selves and competences, unto themselves as a natural part of practice. The aim here is reflection as a routine. Reflection, learning preparedness and thus the ability to “learn how to learn” is crucial. The focus is not so much as on *what* has to be learned or reflected upon – because that changes continually anyhow. As pointed out by a couple of Danish researchers: “What has to be mastered constantly changes, and so the processes of learning and reflection become more important than the content of what has to be learned” (Elmholdt, og Brinkmann 2006: 172, translation by Betina Wolfgang Rennison).

Central to the transformational dimension is management’s continued ability to build and develop its reflective capacity, its ability to transcend and transform itself in the light of something else or something new. This, what we can call reflection regime, is based on a pedagogical ideal of self-correction and self-development. The manager is seen as the student or apprentice, who has an inborn potential (skills and/or talent) which, through responsibility for own learning, can be shaped and developed towards an increasing state of perfection. As an apprentice, the manager must show cumulative progress and constantly strive toward self-actualization and self-improvement. The reflection is driven by a desire for destruction. The ultimate goal of the individual’s reflection is to creatively destroy their own opportunities for thought and action so as to reinstall new ones. As the Polish professor Zygmunt Baumann has said: “The formation of self and personality is unimaginable in any other form other than as an ongoing, persistently unfinished and open reconstitution.” (Baumann 2008, in Jacobsen 2009: 33, translation by Betina Wolfgang Rennison). The decisive factor is not so much to *create* an identity, but to ensure the possibility that it can be *recreated* when the need arises. Hence, the manager must establish herself in light of a continuing postponement. It is not the objective which is crucial, but the movement towards it which makes all the difference. Management is lifelong learning. And what it means to manage is made all along.

## 3. The four dimensions: An overview

For simplicity’s sake, I present a figure which captures the four dimensions of reflection.

Note: Although the dimensions with their synonym labels as orders or levels can be viewed as sequential phases, elements in a cycle or chronological steps of a staircase, my point here is to maintain them as diverse dimensions



of reflexivity which in different ways characterize the reflective practice, simultaneously or in parallel. Although the typology operates with lower and higher reflexive orders, it does not indicate that something is more important and more correct than something else. There is a mutual dependence between the independent dimensions, where the lower levels give concrete substance to the higher levels, which in turn provide a contextual framework for the lower levels. Without the higher levels, the lower levels would appear as blind and without the lower levels, the higher levels would appear empty. This does not mean that the respective dimensions are only mutually supportive. They may, with their different focus, also be mutually subversive. The first-order reflection, for instance, can be irritated by the second-order reflection’s identity-threatening and time-consuming demands for co-reflection of “the other”; while the second-order reflection can be irritated by the first-order reflection’s self-satisfied closure; and the action-oriented 0-order reflection can be irritated by all kinds of reflective interference of first, second and third orders. The art of reflective management is thus to create a reflective practice that recognizes the dimensions’ unique contributions and makes possible their constructive interaction.

## 4. Discussion: Challenges of reflection

If we are to take reflection’s critical claims seriously, we must also turn our gaze on reflection and the reflective regime itself. The final aim of this article, then, is to cast a critical eye and identify ten challenges to the regime of reflexivity.

A *first* and fundamental challenge to reflexive management and to reflection in general is its claim to break with

the familiar. How do we do it? In self-reflection, we use what is at once paradoxical and natural enough: “our own interpretations filter to discern our own interpretations filter” (Feldsted 2008: 38, Brookfield 1995: 28). So how easy is it really to break away from one’s usual habits and blind passions?

A *second* challenge are the social consequences that may arise by inviting the new and unknown inside, be it; ignoring, re-socialization, disciplining, marginalization and exclusion (Wackhausen 2008: 18). It’s not pleasant if “one of us” suddenly stands out. Learning is not just about individual becoming but also about social belonging.

A *third* challenge is that reflexivity not only co-creates a learning and development culture but also a potential conflict culture (Ratner 2012). When doubt can always be raised about what has been done and thought, when it is legitimate for everybody to question everything, then controversy and clashes emerges. Reflexivity does not take place in a power vacuum: there are different interests and value orientations operating and at stake. Reflexive processes also involve micro-political processes that set the framework for what is right/wrong to think and do in given contexts. It creates an extra layer in the reflexive management; namely, the ability to critically reflect on and problematize these power relations that seek to fix and normalize special structures of meaning and templates of action.

A *fourth* challenge to the reflexive management is the duality with which it operates; the reflecting manager at the same time being a stable entity who can step out of herself so as to see herself from outside (observe her beliefs and reaction patterns), as well as a fluid entity who can be shaped and changed on the basis of the self-observation. The self is thus both that which must create the change and that which needs to be changed. But can this occur in practice? When you find yourself in difficult management and cooperative situations characterized by time pressure or difficult emotional issues, do you then have enough self-restraint to reflect on, manage and change your behavior? Can one just quickly split oneself up into the immediately acting self and the reflexive acting self when one is in the thick of things? (Ratner 2011).

A *fifth* challenge is that the permanently posing questions and demand for continuous re-framing, not only leads to endless reflections which in principle never cease, but also might cast suspicion upon the manager’s professional and personal abilities, installing doubt as the basic premise and creating a constant uncertainty about when enough is enough and what is good enough. Reflection thus promotes not only the power to act, but in the worst case risks contributing to an inability to act.

A *sixth* challenge is not to give the reflection too much credit in the belief that the practice can be changed via reflection. There is a rational causality embedded in the reflection regime, based upon a prediction of the consequences of actions – “if I now think/do such and such, then it will mean so and so”. But is the reality so predictable? Just think of the situations (and associated frustrations), when a manager, despite reflexive self-corrections, nevertheless does not see a change in practice, partly because there are more factors than just the manager herself that determines a change.

A *seventh* challenge, linked to the above, is the primacy which the concept of reflection traditionally assigns to the individual. The assumption is that the individual can understand and master the external world through individual reflexive processes and subsequent choices for change. First comes the subject (with its knowledge, experience, preferences and reflection about it), and then comes the effect on the world. But as we know things can also go the other way around: the subject can be an effect of the environmental conditions; the individual and her choices are framed and shaped by vocabularies, terms and values “out there”. Individual agency (and reflexivity) are embedded in social structures, just as social structures operate through individuals. This dual constitutional condition of all sociality also applies to the reflexive management.

An *eighth* challenge is that reflexivity tends toward a self-therapeutic confessional regime with an instruction that the individual knows and confesses herself to the fullest. The subject, in its reflexive self-relation, makes herself into an object and under its own and others’ supervision openly confesses her “sins”, strengths/weaknesses, her inadequacy or rather, her yet unrealized potential for improvement, and thereby transforms herself in this direction. This calls for a balancing of: 1. transparency: should everything necessarily be visible and available for the public; are all aspects of a person relevant to the workplace? Where to draw the line between professional function and private person?, 2. narcissism: how to avoid what the reflexive self-relation becomes too self-absorbed and self-centered (despite the intention of being able to consider “the other”)?; 3. individualism, how to prevent the reflexive approach from a restricted view of the individual as the primary source of problems/solutions – and/or making workplace/community-related problems into an individual problem that can be solved through increased self-reflection and self-correction? (Swan 2008).

A *ninth* challenge is that because reflection typically “bends backward”; it tends to be backward-looking and not forward-looking, adaptively corrective rather than rad-

ically change-oriented. The reflective mirror only reflects what it sees; the actual scene. It does not allow new scenery to emerge. Other approaches such as “profection” (Rod 2010) and “diffraction” (Keevers and Treleaven 2011 with reference to Barad 2007, Haraway 2004) do not reflect back on themselves but spread themselves out like prisms, bending around “corners”, breaking with the self-referential, and opening up new patterns. Here the already occurred is not interpreted; instead, there is experimentation with what might happen. Here there is no detour around the reflexive thought, instead we jump headlong to action – and then just sees what happens.

A tenth and final challenge is that reflection is predominantly produced as a cognitive-linguistic phenomenon, where emotional and affective aspects are typically reduced to accompanying phenomena. Alternative approaches

such as “emotional reflexivity” (Homes 2010) “sanflection” (Mølholm 2010) or “affection” (e.g. Amhøj 2011, Staunæs 2012) would more explicitly emphasize the importance of body, emotions, senses, moods, flow, intensity, physicality and spontaneity. The challenge for reflexive management, however, consists not so much in emphasizing the one or the other, the cognitive versus the affective, but using their connection as a source of enrichment. This calls for new research.

## 5. Conclusion

All these challenges outlined above do not invalidate the importance and need of reflection. Rather, they illustrate its blind spots so that in using the reflexive model in practice we know what we can see and not see with this way of handling the complexity of modern management.

## References

- Andersen, N.Å. (1999): *Diskursive analysestrategier* Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann, Copenhagen: Nyt fra Samfundsvidenskaberne.
- Amhøj, C. (2011). ”At danse med det abstrakte”, *Chara - Tidsskrift for kreativitet, spontanitet og ledelse*, Copenhagen.
- Argyris, C. (2000): ”Organisatorisk læring – single- og double-loop”, in K. Illeris, *Tekster om læring*, Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.
- Bateson, G. (2000): ”The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication”, in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Docherty, P, Boud, D. and Cressey, P. (2006): *Productive Reflection at Work*, Oxon/New York: Routledge.
- Elbrønd, M. (2008): ”På sporet af refleksion”, *Refleksion i praksis*, Skriftserie, nr. 8: 2008, RUML, Institut for filosofi og idehistorie, Aarhus Universitet.
- Elmhødt, C. og Brinkmann, S. (2006): ”Discursive practices at work”, in D. Boud, P. Cressey and P. Docherty *Productive Reflection at Work*, Oxon/New York: Routledge.
- Esposito, E. (1996): ”From self-reference to autology: How to operationalize a circular approach”, *Social Science Information*, vol. 35(2).
- Feldsted, P. (2008): ”Refleksion og læring”, *Refleksion i praksis*, Skriftserie, nr. 7: 2008, RUML, Institut for filosofi og idehistorie, Aarhus Universitet.
- Foucault, M. (2000): ”Governmentality”, in J.D. Faubion, Michel Foucault, *Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 3, Power, England, New York, Allen Lane: The Penguin Press.
- Hansen, B. W. (2008): ”Læring og metatænkning”, *Tidsskriftet KvaN* 81/2008, Aarhus: VIA University College.
- Hermansen, M. (1998) (red.): *Fra læringens horisont – en antologi*, Århus: Klim
- Hermansen, M. (2003): *Omlæring*, Århus: Klim.
- Holmes, M. (2010): ”The Emotionalization of Reflexivity”, *Sociology* vol. 44(1).
- Høyrup, S. og Elkjær, B. (2006): ”Reflection: Taking it beyond the individual”, in D. Boud, P. Cressey and P. Docherty *Productive Reflection at Work*, Oxon/New York: Routledge.
- Illeris, K. (2001): *Læring – aktuel læringsteori i spændingsfeltet mellem Piaget, Freud og Marx*, Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.
- Jacobsen, M.H. (2009): *Zygmunt Bauman – Fagre nye læringsliv*, Copenhagen: Forlaget UP - Unge pædagoger.
- Keevers, L. and Treleaven, L. (2011): ”Organizing practices of reflection: A practice-based study”, *Management Learning* 42.
- Keiding, T. (2002): ”Hvor gør man af følelserne? Om det kognitive og det affektive hos Niklas Luhmann”, in J. Rasmussen Luhmann *anvendt*, Copenhagen: Unge pædagoger.
- Kneer, G. and Nassehi, A (1998): *Niklas Luhmann – introduktion til teorien om sociale systemer*, Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Luhmann, Niklas (1982): *The Differentiation of Society*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Luhmann, N. (1997): *Niklas Luhmann, Iagttagelse og paradoks, Essays om autopoietiske systemer*, Copenhagen: Samlerens Bogklub.
- Luhmann, N. (2000): *Sociale systemer*, Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Luhmann, N. (2006): *Samfundets uddannelsessystem*, Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Lystbæk, C. (2011): ”Ledelse af læring af ledelse”, in P. Helth (ed.) *Ledelse og læring i praksis*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- March, J. (1991): ”Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning”, *Organizations Science*, vol. 2(1).
- Mezirow, J. (2000): ”Hvordan kritisk refleksion fører til transformativ læring”, in K. Illeris *Tekster om læring*, Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.
- Mølholm, A. (2010): *Organisering på tværs, En refleksionsmodel til blinde pletter*, Paper til Dansk Ledelsesakademis konference d. 6-7. december 2010.
- Pahuus, M. (2008): ”To former for refleksion: selvrefleksion og saglig refleksion”, *Tidsskriftet KvaN* 81/2008, Aarhus: VIA University College.
- Qvortrup, L. (2008): ”Læring, beslutningskommunikation og selvforandring: Ledelse af den lærende organisation”, in E.E. Sørensen, L. Hounsgaard, B. Ryberg, F.B. Andersen *Ledelse og læring i organisationer*, Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Rander, Henrik (2011): ”Ledelse af refleksion og læring - lederens anvendelse af refleksion som redskab for læring, kompetenceudvikling og organisationsudvikling”, in P. Helth (ed.) *Ledelse og læring i praksis*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Ratner, H. (2011): *Folkeskolen i refleksionens spejlkabinet*, Information 23.06.11, <http://www.information.dk/271787>
- Ratner, H. (2012): *Promises of Reflexivity, Managing and Researching Inclusive Schools*, Doctoral School of Organisation and Management Studies, Ph.D. Series 24.2012, Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School.

- Rennison, B. (2007): "Cash, Codes and Complexity - New Adventures in the Public Management of Pay Scales", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2007: Elsevier.
- Rod, P. (2010). Præambel: Profleksion, marts 2010, UCC: København.
- Schaarup, P. (2008): "Kvalitet i ledelse – ledelse i kvalitet – en anden ordens kobling af ledelse, læring og evaluering", in E.E. Sørensen, L. Hounsgaard, B. Ryberg, F.B. Andersen *Ledelse og læring i organisationer*, Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Schön, D. (2000): "Udvikling af ekspertise gennem refleksion-i-handling", in K. Illeris *Tekster om læring*, Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.
- Schön, D. A. (2001): *Den reflekterende praktiker*, Århus: Klim.
- Seidl, D. and Becker, K.H. (2005): "Niklas Luhmann and Organization Studies", i S.R., Clegg and R. Stablein (eds.), *Advances in Organization Studies*, Sweden: Liber, Herndon, US: Copenhagen Business School Press, Oxfordshire: Marston.
- Spencer-Brown, G. (1969): *Laws of Form*, London: George Allen and Unwin LTD.
- Staunæs, D. (2012): "Psy-ledelse: Ledelse af/i uddannelsesorganisationer efter den affektive vending", *Kvinder, køn & forskning* nr. 3 2012.
- Steegeager, N. and Laursen, E. (2011): *Organisationer i bevægelse – Læring, udvikling, intervention*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Swan, E. (2008): "Let's not get too personal: critical reflection, reflexivity and the confessional turn", *Journal of European Industrial Training*, vol. 32(5).
- Tangkjær, C. (2011): "Refleksiv ledelse: Hvordan du skaber problemer for dig selv?", *Erhvervspsykologi* vol. 9(4).
- Thyssen, O. (1992): "Forhold som forholder sig til sig selv", In J.C. Jakobsen (ed.) *Autopoiesis, udvalgte tekster af Niklas Luhmann*, Copenhagen: Forlaget Politisk Revy.
- Wackerhausen, S. (2008): "Erfaringsrum, handlingsbåren kundskab og refleksion", *Refleksion i praksis*, Skriftserie, nr. 1: 2008, RUML, Institut for filosofi og idehistorie, Aarhus Universitet.
- Wahlgren, B., Høyrup, S., Pedersen, K. and Rattleff, P. (2002): *Refleksion og læring – kompetenceudvikling i arbejdslivet*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Walsh, A. (2009): "Modes of Reflection: Is it possible to use both individual and collective reflection to reconcile the 'three party knowledge interests' in workplace learning?", *European Journal of Education* vol. 44(3).