

Reflection study worldwide: a research report

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We have undertaken a survey-based exploration of reflection around the world, in preparation for research into social differences in coaching conversations. Through professional coach organisations, journals and LinkedIn, we reached out to an international group of professionals and asked them about their reflection-on-work practice. Our main findings are that indeed there are geographical differences in engaging with reflection. Interestingly, the amount of democracy in a country as measured objectively, correlates with how safe professionals feel to reflect on their work.

The questionnaire contained 37 questions about reflection practice, both regarding the reflection about work challenges alone and together with colleagues or professionals. There were also four demographic questions, mapping gender, age, nationality, and current occupation. We received completed questionnaires from 309 professionals, 69.9 % female with average age 53 years (minimum 19 maximum 81). Professionals from 42 countries participated, with the largest ones being the U.S., Ireland, Germany, South Africa, U.K., and The Netherlands, in ascending order.

We obtained national democracy scores from V-Dem (V16) database (Coppedge *et al.*, 2026; Pemstein *et al.*, 2026). We used five indices of democracy: Electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy index. Each index measure 'To what extent is the ideal of electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, or egalitarian democracy achieved?' These indices of democracy score are highly correlated.

Age

Pairwise correlation results revealed that reflection does change with age. We find Pearson correlations above 0.2 ($p < 0.001$) between age and degree of working with external coaches and consultants, organising reflection separate from work, feeling safe that nothing will be fed back to the employer, and trusting that AI can help with reflection. Feeling freedom and space when reflecting also correlates to an extent with age ($p < 0.01$).

Geography

Pairwise correlation also reveals one clear difference between countries: The level of democracy does correlate strongly with how safe people are feeling to reflect ('how safe is it in your culture to reveal yourself'). All the five measures of democracy

(electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberate and egalitarian democracy) correlate strongly with this safety level (0.18-0.22; $p < 0.001$), a medium-size effect.

Specific differences between countries were noted but not hugely significant. The perceived safety of revealing oneself to work colleagues or outsiders is higher in the Netherlands than in the UK ($p < 0.01$), as well as the extent to which individuals feel comfortable sharing reflections with family or loved ones. The use of notetaking and journaling during reflection is higher in the Netherlands than in the UK ($p < 0.01$) and higher in Germany than in the USA ($p < 0.01$). Other country differences only had a $p < 0.05$ significance level: USA professionals experience slightly less freedom and space to reflect than those in Germany or The Netherlands, and those in the USA dare to share less with family and dear ones than those in The Netherlands; finally, French professionals say they consult more with friends outside of work than German professionals, and the French believe more that consultants and coaches are overpaid.

Gender

There were very few significant differences with gender. Women did look more for warmth and support in reflection than men ($p < 0.001$), or they dare to admit this more on this questionnaires. All other differences between men and women were only $p < 0.05$ significance level, with women seeking reflection slightly more separate from work, more paid reflection with external consultants or coaches, and seeking more challenge in reflection.

Professional differences

We found quite a lot of evidence for differences amongst the professions. Some of those differences were predictable, as one would expect those that help others with reflections, such as consultants and coaches, to be more warmly disposed towards reflection than others and to be more fond of external helpers when it comes to reflection at work. Such was confirmed by our data, with high significance ($p < 0.001$) across a great number of questions including around psychological safety and allowing challenge. Conform their own chosen profession, coaches and consultants work more with external coaches/consultants as they reflect on their work, and they feel more understood by them ($p < 0.01$). External coaches also organise reflection more separate from work ($p < 0.01$) than all other professions, as is true for HR consultants as compared to managers ($p < 0.05$). The extent to which reflection becomes ruminative, or circular, is higher for project leaders than for external coaches ($p < 0.01$)

Some differences were found also between non-coaching professionals. The extent to which individuals feel that professional coaches around them understand their

goals is higher for directors than for project leaders ($p < 0.01$), managers ($p < 0.05$), and internal coaches ($p < 0.05$). We found that directors recognised the value of reflection significantly more than project leaders ($p < 0.05$).

Different professions also reported significantly different goals of reflection (all $p < 0.05$): project leaders emphasise concrete, specific solutions; directors, HR consultants, and project leaders emphasise innovation and new ideas; directors and external coaches emphasise challenge and a mirror; and finally, internal consultants emphasise warmth and support.

Discussion

This study has taught us a lot about the delicate practice of reflection related to work activities. We have found many indications that safety and support are important for reflection, but also that those who have a modicum of safety for reflections (such as those living in a democracy, or those in external professions that make them less dependent on their work bosses and commissioners) emphasise challenge and holding up the mirror as important goals for reflection. In other words, support is needed to get into reflection, whilst challenge is important for coming out with a good result. It seems overall as if older participants, women and external coaches feel the safest to reflect, as well as those in democratic countries.

We conclude from the data that reflection is highly valued amongst all age groups, genders and professions, but that some professionals that are slightly more exposed need good protection and strong boundaries so as to engage in it and be open towards reflection.

It was remarkable that despite the relatively small dataset we were able to significantly link one question, the one around a 'safe space' for reflection, to an internationally agreed and objective democracy measure. This gives us further evidence that reflection can be positively impacted by objective psychological factors, even macro-political factors such as freedom of speech, political control, tolerance and plurality of views, as one would expect.

What does it all mean for coaches?

Workplace coaches are very much involved with nurturing and promoting reflection in our clients. Facilitating reflection in the workplace may be seen as a defining feature of all workplace and executive coaching (De Haan & Burger, 2005; De Haan & Stoffels, 2023). We believe that the results of this study help coaches to adapt their skills more to their clients, homing in on their clients' different stances towards reflection.

Firstly, *psychological safety* seems of utmost importance in coaching, and there is clearly not always enough of it there. When there is not enough psychological safety in the coaching relationship, i.e., when trust in coaching is not high or the culture and

organisation are not conducive to this freedom of reflection, it may be the case that coaches first need to work on safety before they can begin to promote and deepen reflection. On the other hand, when psychological safety is already high, such as in more democratic cultures or for external consultants and coaches and directors as compared to managers and project leaders, and perhaps also for more mature professionals and for women more than men, then the coach can and indeed should challenge and hold up a clear and unsparing mirror to bring truth and freshness to the reflective process.

There is already a lot of thinking about psychological safety in the coaching, therapy and supervision literatures, from the very beginning. We do not have the scope to summarise this thinking here. However, one useful way of thinking about safety and coaching is through the metaphor of 'the castle and the battlefield' (Harrison, 1963). Roger Harrison argues that for consulting and other developmental / reflective work to be effective, we first need a 'castle' as a sine qua non; a safe place with thick walls providing such important elements as structure, confidentiality and containment. Once the castle is there and professional feels truly safe and at home, then s/he can be invited to step out to the tournament or battlefield, where probing with new perspectives happens and new intentions moves, and decisions can be invented, practiced, and reviewed. When both arenas, i.e., both support and challenge, are strong, profound learning and change can and will happen.

One more thing that coaches can do is... fight for democracy. Most organisations are autocratic, top-down structures that weigh upon most managers and professionals, forcing them to do as been told and stick to the agreed procedures and methods. Such autocracy can at times be stifling and hierarchical management may induce fear, which is why workplaces are not always so well suited to reflection. Coaches can be aware of this, address it in their work with organisations, and be strongly protective of their coachees when speaking with more powerful members of their organisation (Skinner, 2012). Part of the work is often to create a safe, open, naïve, and irreverent space within a much less conducive overarching culture or commission.

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