



14

The Value of Group Reflection

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I would have continued to stay in water, doing my best until I got ill. I will never dare to stand alone again – that is what this group has taught me!

—Participant in a managerial group reflection

Introduction

What happens when managers from different organisations reflect upon their challenging work relationships and everyday relational work situations? Being a manager at work can be lonely and challenging. In daily practice, many activities that managers perform are unconscious and

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unspoken. Collective reflection presents an opportunity for the managers to bring the unspoken and unconscious to the forefront, thus creating a space for the identification of values. Group reflection can strengthen values consciousness and reflexivity among individual actors. As values guide choices of actions, values consciousness may even change and improve practice (Aadland & Askeland, 2017), which is also suggested by the positive relationship between managers' values consciousness and innovation in organisations (Nygaard & Løvaas, 2019). Thus, working with values such as having a space to reflect on activities and work situations may facilitate values consciousness and allow for changes and improvements in practice. In this way, group reflection may serve to link everyday practices with the overall purpose of the organisation.

Values work both presupposes and increases reflexivity. The concept of values work, as described in Chapter 1, includes 'reflection-creating processes' producing value-related actions in specific situations (Espedal, 2019, p. 30). This chapter situates the perspective of values work by investigating the significance of middle managers' reflection processes in a group supervision programme. Hence, managerial group reflection serves as an example of values work. We adopt a practice-based and micro-level perspective on how to perform values work, as described in Chapter 1. Since the chapter explores group reflection processes that involve managers from different organisations, we look specifically at values work being performed by managers outside their daily institutional environments that produce value-related actions inside their organisations.

In this research, we pay special attention to reflections on challenging work relationships and everyday relational work situations. Relationships at work can be a source of enrichment that allows individual actors and organisations to learn, grow and flourish, or they can be toxic and dysfunctional. Relationships are fundamental to organisations and have always been a part of organisational theory and management theory (Heaphy et al., 2018). Management researchers have long recognised that the 'people make the place' (Schneider, 1987). Further, positive organisational scholars have given attention to work relationships by the substantial body of research on high-quality connections as a powerful source for organisations (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Stephens, Heaphy

& Dutton, 2012). Thus, reflecting on work relationships and daily relational situations and practices is important to organisations, as the reflections may enable new actions and practices that could be more beneficial than the routinised versions. This study aims to examine the significance of managers performing values work via group reflections on challenging work relationships and everyday relational work situations. Specifically, it examines how middle managers in organisations can be relational agents aiding individual actors and organisations with work relationships and hopefully contribute to the betterment of workplaces.

Reflection groups are of different types, such as supervision groups (Vråle, 2017), ethical reflection groups (Aadland, 2010; Eide & Aadland, 2017) and coaching groups (Brown & Grant, 2010). An aspect common to all these types of group reflection is that they all belong to the ‘thinking slow’ category (Kahneman, 2011). In his book titled, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Kahneman draws attention to how the human mind works to improve judgements and decision-making. This study is mainly concerned with the process of thinking slow together with others—reflecting together in groups. Group reflection, as opposed to individual reflection, can offer additional information that may lie outside one’s own thoughts. It may also allow for identification with others to foster mutual learning and growth. This occurs through the mechanisms of recognition—where individuals recognise aspects of their selves in others—and integration—where individuals incorporate aspects of others into their own selves (Humbred & Rouse, 2016).

In this chapter, we describe a qualitative empirical intervention involving group reflections with middle managers from different work sectors. The intervention was a supervised group reflection implemented over a six-month period. The aim was to examine the value of supervised group reflection, and the research question guiding this chapter is: *What is the significance of middle managers’ participation in a group supervision that focuses on their work relationships?* We investigate both the processes of group supervision and the practices/outcomes, with a specific focus on value-related actions.

Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

Identity

Identity is essential to social life and is a central construct to meaning and motivation, logics of action and decision-making among others. Identity answers the question ‘Who am I?’ and covers roles, social relations and group membership. Studies on identity are situated in different contexts such as organisational, professional, social and individual. We focus on the individual level and view identity as ‘the sense an individual has of oneself’ (Grönlund, 2011, p. 855). This sense of self is viewed as a reflexive and continuous project (Giddens, 1991). In other words, identity changes and develops throughout an individual’s life. This ongoing process of constructing identities is called identity work (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003). As discussed by Askeland (Chapter 2 in this volume), values are part of and inherently connected to identity and identity work. Thus, we argue that working with values in group reflections is connected to the ongoing process of participants’ identity work.

Self-Awareness in Identity Processes

The concept of self-awareness is rooted in the disciplines of both psychology and sociology (Carver, 2012), and it relates to the salience of social and personal values. Self-awareness in identity processes is related to the concept of self-identity (Sirris, 2019). It implies having access to one’s values, feelings and processes. Self-awareness also implies flexible access to one’s own affects. The self has a unique capacity termed reflexivity, which refers to ‘the ability to turn around and take itself as the object of its own view’ (Carver, 2012, p. 50). In this chapter, we specifically focus on self-awareness because participation in group reflection facilitates processes of self-awareness and consciousness, which are related to questions such as ‘Who am I’ and ‘Who do I want to be, should be and can be’ (Vråle, 2015). Identification with others also strengthens self-awareness. Identification is linked to the question, ‘How do I come to know who I am in relation to you?’ (Humbred & Rouse, 2016, p. 438). Identifying

with one another, for instance in a group reflection, may foster mutual learning and growth.

Supervision

Scholars (such as Tveiten, 2013; Vråle, 2015, 2017) have explained supervision as conscious reflections and dialogues based on humanistic values, related to experiences from practical leadership. It helps managers focus on their own manners, understand themselves better and possibly change their ways of thinking and practices as leaders (Vråle, 2017). Severinsson (2014) notes even though supervision is a relatively new scientific method, its results confirm the importance of the opportunity to reflect on one's practical work. Brunero and Stein-Parbury (2008) reported that supervision may prevent burnout, and Løkvik (2019) showed that the positive outcomes of group reflection include increased self-consciousness and increased organisational commitment. Jensen, Rossavik, and Husebø (2018) concluded that group supervision for middle managers may create common room for understanding different problems and encourage leaning on others for support when new challenges occur.

With regard to ethics reflection groups, Hem, Molewijk, Gjerberg, Lillemoen, and Pederson (2018) showed that participants promote improved professional competence and confidence. Vråle, Borge, and Nedberg (2017) identified courage as an important dimension of ethics reflection groups. While a number of studies have examined the influence of group reflection on nurses in health care, few have focused on managers.

We aim to add to the knowledge on group reflection among organisational managers with the help of an action-based intervention. We also seek to contribute to the sparse literature on values work (see Chapter 3 by Espedal for a review), proposed by Gehman, Trevino, and Garud (2013), by studying how engaging in group reflection processes outside their institutions allows managers to produce value-related actions inside their organisations.

Method

We conducted a six-month group supervision programme, from November 2017 to May 2018, for middle managers from different work sectors. As part of the intervention, the participants reflected on their challenging work relationships, everyday relational work situations and practices in a group.

Six female middle managers from different work sectors were recruited from a value-based leadership programme at VID Specialized University to attend 10 supervised group reflection meetings (Table 14.1). Four of the participants were from the non-profit sector, one participant was from the public health sector, and one participant represented the private profit sector. Three of the four non-profit participants worked at different faith-based institutions. The age range of the participants was from 30 to 60 years.

The study adopts an action-based approach that aims at both taking action and creating knowledge (Coghlan & Shani, 2018; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; McNiff, 2017), described in the following. Inspired by the principles of research circles (Slettebø, 2013) where practitioners develop research questions along with the researchers, we invited the participants to a workshop (Meeting 1). Questions such as how to develop sustainable relationships at work were introduced by the participants in the workshop, and they were addressed in the focus group interviews and during the group supervisions.

The researchers were leading and taking part in all of the 10 meetings. Information from the two group interviews (Meetings 2 and 10) was recorded and transcribed, and translated direct quotations from these

Table 14.1 Outline of the group meetings

Meeting 1	Workshop in which the researchers (authors of the study) and practitioners (six informants) jointly developed ideas for the research question
Meeting 2	Focus group interview before the group supervisions about relational work, practices and values
Meeting 3–9	Seven group supervisions on relational aspects of leadership (intervention)
Meeting 10	Focus group interview after the group supervisions

meetings have been included in the findings. During the seven group supervisions (Meetings 3–9), log notes were maintained by us. References to these log notes in the findings are not always direct quotations, but close interpretations of the participants' views. The participants confirmed the interpretations and also commented on the preliminary drafts of the chapter.

Description of the Intervention

We used team reflections (Andersen, 1994), ethical reflections (Aadland, 2010; Eide & Aadland, 2017), and 'outsider witness responses' (Lundby, 2005) in the supervision group meetings. Each meeting lasted for 90 minutes. The intention behind all the sessions was to create space for recognition and identification. Each session began with the supervisor reading some text based on topics from the previous meeting to introduce continuity, such as a passage on self-consciousness. This was followed by a group participant narrating an event from her daily work as a middle manager. One of the supervisors interviewed her. While she narrated her story, the other participants reflected as a team (Andersen, 1994), they first listened without speaking.

After the narration, the rest of the group shared their reflections in a fixed format: what special detail in the narration made an impression on them, what according to them was the intention of the narrator, what related experience did they remember from their role as a leader, and what did they want to tell the owner of experience (Lundby, 2005). The reflections were instructive and were to be shared in an open and appreciative way. They were also expected to be informative and valuable to the rest of the participants. At the end of each session, the supervisor asked the narrator to summarise her learning and her key takeaways from the session for future reflections.

Data Analysis

First, data from the two group interviews were transcribed. We independently noted interesting and important aspects in the transcripts and

developed initial coding categories. Next, we discussed and refined our preliminary coding and categories and jointly developed the categories through mutual consent. Treating coding as a starting point rather than an end point (Locke, Feldman, & Golden-Biddle, 2016), we also identified three questions: (1) What kind of relational situations did the participants bring into the supervision groups, (2) what types of relational mechanisms occurred within the supervision group, and (3) what did the participants gain out of the supervision group—where did they move? These questions shaped our interpretation of the data. Thematic analyses and systematic coding of the data were performed using NVivo. We also relied on theories on self and identity for understanding the material. We went back and forth between empirical data and theoretical frameworks until we were satisfied with our justification of participant experiences. Oscillating between data and existing theory signals the use of an abductive approach (Bryman, 2012).

Ethical Considerations and Limitations of the Study

This study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). The respondents were informed about the intended use of the data, confidentiality of information, voluntary participation, etc.

A methodological limitation of this study is that intervention was evaluated by the researchers who conducted it. The researchers/authors of the study were also the supervisors of the group reflection intervention. However, to ensure an objective evaluation, the evaluation process was therefore conducted on paper, and participation information was anonymised. Another limitation of this study is that the sample did not include any male leaders.

Findings

With regard to the first question of what relational situations were brought into the group, seven situations were narrated in the seven group meetings. Four were pertained to cooperation problems with a (superior)

leader, one was related to a subordinate, and two were related to private decision-making—of which one concerned a family business. One situation was addressed twice, as a follow-up after some months.

The narrations examined values such as power versus powerlessness and trust versus mistrust. Participants expressed their powerlessness and mistrust in different ways. Juggling two parallel levels of hierarchy in the organisations made the power structure unclear and unpredictable for the middle managers. One of the managers complained of being tired, ‘I have tried to tell them in 5 years and six months’. Another expressed feeling trapped by her superior: ‘I feel I am “bought and paid”, I am a dependent upon my leader because I need a reference from her’. Powerlessness was also expressed as lack of hope: ‘There is no way back, the conflict has gone too far’. One participant described her leader’s evaluation of her in the following words: ‘I was characterised as passive aggressive by the leader in a group meeting at work. That is the worst thing I have ever experienced’. These accounts test the value of trust, which is fundamental to a healthy work relationship.

Negative evaluations by leaders (such as being passive aggressive) may disturb an individual’s sense of peace and force them to lose control over work, feel tired or report sick. Other values that were highlighted in the narrated situations were honesty—‘I can’t answer honestly’—and freedom—‘I do not wish to be bound by structures of power! I want to choose my own way!’ Powerlessness and feelings of helplessness may be understood as an existential phenomenon. Analysing such situations in a group reflection may help leaders decide on the next steps while fulfilling their responsibility and duties (Severinsson, 2014).

The second question pertained to the relational mechanisms seen in the group reflections. We found that participants *developed* and *practised* values such as openness and courage in the supervision group. One participant expressed it as follows: ‘Practicing openness, honesty and courage in the group and experiencing identification from the others created movements and growth for me individually and for us as a group’. The openness *practised* in the group was evident when a participant described herself as passive aggressive. By telling the group that it was ‘the worst thing I have ever experienced’, she demonstrated a willingness to share without fear. Similarly, the participants discussed and openly disagreed

on topics such as the merits and demerits of leadership alliances. The participants seemed to feel safe among middle managers from different organisations. One participant described the group as a space to ‘slap and slam, but also to test out’, which was indicative of a safe environment in the group.

Openness was also evident in the sense of inquiry that characterised the group discussions: the supervisors and participants used open-ended questions instead of defining and concluding statements. One participant summarised this experienced in the following words: ‘You ask questions, without having a direction, but rather being open. I think this is important to for me to do as a leader as well’.

The value of openness was *developed* at an early stage in the supervisions. In the first group meeting, time was spent on becoming familiar with the group and laying down some rules, such as for confidentiality. This process could have enabled and facilitated openness. Further, the structure of the group session was the same for all the seven sessions. This predictable structure may also have contributed to the psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) and sense of creativity of the participants.

As the participants freely shared their stories, the supervision group engaged in identification through the mechanism of recognition, where individuals recognise aspects of themselves that they share with others, and through the mechanism of integration, where individuals incorporate aspects of others into their own selves (Humbred & Rouse, 2016).

The findings related to the third and main question (what the participants gained from the group reflections) can be divided into two categories: moving inward and moving forward. The first represents individual growth and self-awareness in identity processes, while the latter captures value-related actions.

Moving Inward

Some of the individual actors learned more about their own emotions from the group reflection work. Statements like ‘I didn’t know I was that angry’ highlighted *increased awareness of one’s own emotions*. During a session, the supervisor asked a participant to rate her anger on a scale

from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. The participant answered, 'At least 8. My anger is in my stomach and in my neck'. The scaling question served to awaken and generate awareness of unrecognised feelings.

Listening to the others' reflections on one's own narration also stirred suppressed emotions, as noted by a participant: 'My feelings have been very much stronger after this meeting. It is a note to self that I carry feelings, I don't want to overlook these feelings'. Thus, the group reflections enabled the individual actors to be more aware of their own emotions.

Another approach to moving inward and developing self-identity is the *awareness of one's boundaries* (Schibbye, 2011; Vråle, 2015), which has a dialectical relationship with self-awareness. To be well-defined as a person, one should be self-reflexive and vice versa (Schibbye, 2011). One of the participants noted that meeting in groups helped to 'get to know own limits and boundaries, to take care of oneself'. This points to the development of self-awareness through the knowledge of self-boundaries. Another participant said, 'The group helped me to clarify what are my limits'. One participant learned to correct her own mistakes with the help of group reflections, and another participant called for more challenging discussions to identify any blind spots that she may have.

The findings indicate that the development of self-identity is accelerated when individuals find their own feelings, thoughts and reactions reciprocated in others' experiences. A participant expressed this as follows: 'One needs an echo-room, a soundboard room like this'. This quote highlights the need to be identified and appreciated. Identification through recognition is vital to growth and learning (Humbred & Rouse, 2016), and consequently, for the development of self-identity.

Before the intervention, the participants were asked about their expectations from the programme, and they all mentioned self-development in one way or another. These expectations were collectively experienced as 'moving inward'. Findings indicate that spaces for group reflection enable individual actors to *move inward* through increased self-awareness of emotions and through increased awareness of own boundaries. This is an approach to constructing self-identity and thus performing identity work.

Moving Forward

The group reflections also enabled the participants to ‘move forward’ in different ways. One participant moved forward by quitting her job. Another one commented that the supervision group helped with a difficult decision: ‘The group gave me strength to take an important decision. It has been a catalyst for the decision I have had inside for some time’. The courage to overcome difficult situations, including feelings of powerlessness, can be explained by the encouragement received in the supervision group. Similar findings reported by Vråle et al. (2017), Rokke (2017) and Jensen et al. (2018) suggest that the development of courage is a result of group reflection. In the study, the reflections empowered the participants to move away from feelings of loneliness and powerlessness to courageous decisions. Some participants who were ‘stuck’ found a way forward.

Some participants also moved forward by implementing new changes in their actions. For instance, while having a difficult conversation with her leader, one of the participants tried to be more humble and vulnerable. She actioned this new approach by informing and sharing her emotions with the leader: ‘Now I have tried to add a new element in the dialogue, I have included my emotions in a way. That was actually a success’. The participant moved forward by trying out a new approach. She found it to be successful as her leader responded to her by communicating in a ‘more human’ way. This is an example of values work: how group reflection processes performed by leaders outside their daily institutional environments produce value-related action inside the organisation.

In sum, this study indicates that the significance of group reflection and slow thinking (Kahneman, 2011) enables individual actors to *move inward* through increased self-awareness and to *move forward* by implementing value-related action. These findings are illustrated in Fig. 14.1. The ‘bringing in’ component in the figure represents the situations narrated by the participants, and the space for group reflection in the figure represents what happens when reflecting together. In addition to the mechanism of recognition, experiences of openness and identification describe what happened in the space for group reflection, enabling the participants to move inward and forward.

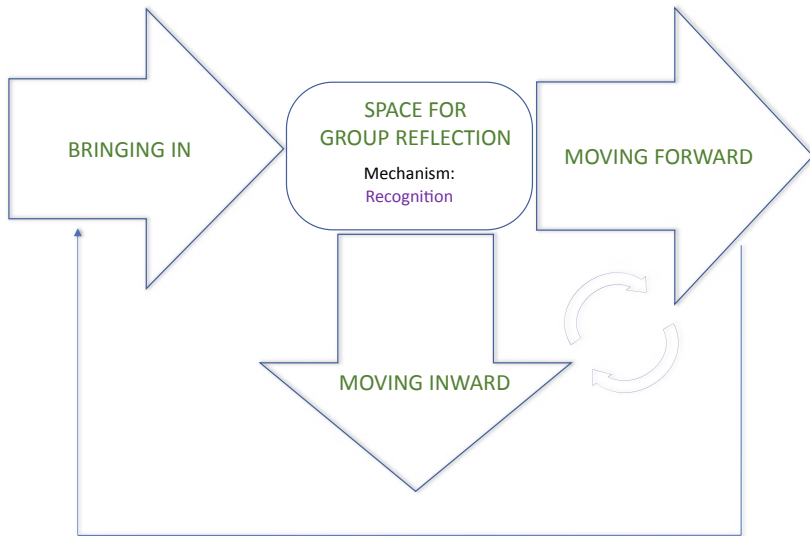


Fig. 14.1 The process, mechanism and significance of group reflection

Discussion

Findings indicate that spaces for group reflection enable individual actors to *move inward* via identity processes such as increased awareness of own emotions as well as to *move forward* by implementing new actions (Fig. 14.1). The arrow between moving inward and moving forward can be explained as increased awareness of emotions that leads to forward movements. For instance, one participant said, ‘Workers come to my office and pour their rage. I have to follow the administrative line. I deal with my rage by seeking three new jobs!’ This is a practical example of the link between moving inward and moving forward. There also exists a link between the ‘moving forward’ box and the ‘bringing in’ box in Fig. 14.1. While there is no empirical evidence to support this linkage, it has been included to signify that moving forward, such as trying out new steps of action, can introduce new challenges.

Findings from this study indicate that group reflection on daily work situations narrated by leaders may help individual leaders to increase their self-awareness. This self-awareness may stem from the process of

listening patiently to a narrator's story in a group reflection, with an open mind and in complete attention. The structured and predictable format of group reflections and the guaranteed confidentiality of the information shared possibly create a safe space for the members in the group (Vråle, 2015). Articulating difficult situations and experiences in a safe atmosphere, as well as identifying and naming the values at stake along with other leaders, sensitises the participants to new meanings and to their own feelings, values and thoughts. Further, self-identifying and being identified, through mirroring and emotional support from other group members, seem to facilitate increased self-awareness and integrity in decision-making related to daily work.

A key finding of this study is that the participants experienced increased awareness of their own emotions. One participant did not realise the extent of her anger (moving inward), while another moved forward by communicating her emotions to her leader. Emotions can provide valuable information about the values at stake. They may function as safeguards or alarms, signalling that important values, such as integrity and trust, are under threat. This may manifest in an awareness of anger, as with the participant in the supervision group. Values are made meaningful through emotions, that are the 'glue binding people together' (Zietsma, Toubiana, Voronov, & Roberts, 2019). Although emotions shape the lives, actions and experiences of institutional actors (Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018), until very recently, they have been largely ignored in the literature on organisational institutionalism (Lok, Creed, DeJordy, & Voronov, 2017). Focusing on emotions in organisations is relevant and important to organisational life and practices. This study shows that group reflection enables individual actors to move inward by developing self-identity. Identity is fluid and not static; as a result, actors continuously construct their identity. Working with values in a group reflection is one approach to constructing identity and hence performing identity work (Sirris, 2019).

The role of reflection is a central component of the agency perspective that involves awareness of possibilities in everyday work situations. Based on the findings of this study, we argue that managerial group reflection on relational work situations, as a way of performing values work, may nurture relational agency. Relational agency can be defined

as a 'reflexive and purposive capacity to initiate and carry out actions for improving relationships in the workplace' (Sundet & Carlsen, 2019). The agency perspective proposes a lasting capacity that goes beyond the momentary meetings highlighted, for instance, in the substantial body of research on high-quality connections (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Relational agency is an important concept and approach as it has the power to influence what many people consider the most important aspect of life—relationships, and moreover, the quality of relationships (Waldinger, 2015). Thus, at a practical level, investigating and finding ways to seed relational agency in managers may play an important role in organisations and potentially contribute to the betterment of workplaces. Group reflection on practices and everyday relational work situations can be seen as an avenue to seed relational agency in managers through experiences of openness, identification and recognition in the group, enabling individual actors to move inward and forward. Thus, values work through managerial group reflection can be an approach to cultivating relational agency.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter highlights the significance of middle managers' group reflection centred on their work relationships. In essence, group reflections are valuable as they enable individual actors to move inward, by constructing their self-identity, and move forward by executing new steps of action at work. Values work effected by managerial group reflection can be an approach to cultivating relational agency. Such engagement may contribute to better practices and thus better quality of organisational life and services. In this way, values work may serve to link everyday practices with the overall purpose of the organisation.

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