



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
FACULTY OF APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING  
Institute for Leadership Education in Engineering

# *Reflection & Awareness*



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Handbook for Student Leaders

Vision, Mission & Strategy  
Motivation & Delegation  
Personal Development & Mastery  
Team Development  
Recruitment  
— **Reflection & Awareness** —  
Transition & Succession  
External Relations  
Leadership Styles  
Purposeful Leadership

# ***How do you stop and listen? What dynamics do you notice? How do you process your experiences? What are you learning?***

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Making time for reflection can sometimes feel in opposition to a value of productivity and active engagement with life. To truly develop as a leader means you need to invest some time (even five minutes a day) to stop “doing” and invest in reflection. This is an intentional space of quietness where you aren’t texting friends, checking emails or listening to anybody talk. It’s a personal time to just think back on the day or the month or the year, and the best physical space to do this is a matter of personal preference.

Reflection is a core practice of leadership, and one that gets forgotten when we are caught up in the rush of life from class to meetings to events to midterms. We miss great opportunities for growth and change when we fail to process events in our lives.

Reflection turns raw experience into meaning and insight: by making sense of what you’re doing and seeing, you build up a strong bank of processed experience to draw on throughout your life. These experiences help you see personal patterns and investigate the underlying assumptions you may have had during a conflict or other situation. This can help you understand the challenges other people are facing, anticipate opportunities, and learn from mistakes in your own life.

## **EXERCISE**

The following sequence of four questions can be used as powerful tools for reflection.<sup>1</sup> The triggering point for asking these questions is an event that catches our attention: whether it made you angry, happy, frustrated or excited, it’s an event with significance.

**1. What happened?** This stage acknowledges the objectivity of the event and its components.

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2. **How did it make me feel?** This second stage recognizes the impact of the event and requires you to connect with your emotions and feelings as precisely as you can. This is a critical skill for effective leadership.

3. **What's the meaning of this event in my life?** This question unravels the event to surface the meaning, learning, insight and implications for our life—both in terms of the event itself and our internal response to it.

4. **What is an appropriate response?** What do I need to do? This final stage integrates the event into our lives, so it's captured in your memory as life-changing. As you move back into the flow of your life and respond, this event becomes solidified as a milestone of your leadership development.

Being aware of your own mental state makes it possible to be more effective in your interactions with other people. This essentially involves paying attention to what's happening, and observing (1) your current emotional state, (2) the context of the situation and (3) your own behaviour. Doing this in the moment makes it possible to more clearly understand the situation and craft a more productive response than if you were reacting without thought. It also protects you from defining yourself based on other people's projections of you and makes it possible to understand other people better.

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Becoming familiar and confident with the process of reflection can be made easier by writing down your thoughts. Keeping a journal or notebook for this is a great habit.

Reflection is related to the broader state of self-awareness: continually clarifying what is important to us. While reflection is a tool for processing things AFTER they happen, mindfulness involves being more aware of experiences AS they are happening.

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<sup>1</sup>Brian Stanfield, *The Courage to Lead*. Chapter 4: Self-conscious Reflection, Page 83-84