

**Self-Reflection in Public Relations Leaders:  
A Study of its Practice and Value in Russia and North America**

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**Abstract**

This study examined self-reflection (SR) in public relations leaders in North America and Russia. SR is a primary way we examine ourselves and how others see us to increase self-awareness, a crucial quality for leaders (Eurich, 2017). Depth interviews averaging 45 minutes in length were conducted with 15 Russian and 15 North American communication leaders, who represented diverse organizational types, possessed more than 10 years of experience and lead or have led communication teams, functions or agencies.

The study confirmed SR is an important leadership capability and quality that is practiced and valued somewhat differently within two systems. The study also revealed many opportunities for improving SR capabilities and practices among communication leaders and professionals. In that regard, the findings bear rich, practical implications for students, professionals and teachers. These are captured in: 1) a six-step strategic SR process for use with students and professionals, 2) a “questioning approach” mentors use to teach meaningful self-inquiry to mentees, and 3) seven building blocks for enriching SR development in the classroom.

*Key words:* Public Relations, Leadership, Self-reflection, Integrated Model of Leadership in PR, Russia, the United States

### **Executive Summary**

Self-reflection is a primary way we examine ourselves and how others see us to increase self-awareness, a crucial quality for leaders. Greek philosophers believed self-knowledge was the highest form of knowledge and essential for critical thinking and self-improvement. Studies in communication, psychology and education confirm these and other benefits of SR, e.g., richer relationships and emotional intelligence, enhanced decision-making and leadership skills and more productive and engaged work teams.

Despite its importance to leaders (and others), SR has received little research attention in public relations. Various leadership theories highlight the importance of SR and self-awareness, notably authentic, servant and transformational theories. In public relations, SR is implicit in Excellence Theory but much more explicit in the Integrated Model of Leadership in PR (Meng & Berger, 2013). This model combines six personal dimensions for excellent leadership, five of which incorporate SR: self-dynamics, team leadership capabilities, relationship building and ethical orientation, and strategic decision making. This model provides the framework for this study.

To learn more about SR perceptions and practices among PR leaders, this study examined SR in diverse Russian (N=15) and North American (N=15) PR leaders via depth interviews. The interviews probed for insights to help answer five research questions: how and to what extent the leaders practiced SR, barriers to productive SR, practical benefits of SR in their work role, and the extent to which mentoring might contribute to the development of SR and leadership capabilities.

Overall, the study found all PR leaders in both countries believed SR is an important leadership capability, though practiced and valued somewhat differently in the two systems. The leaders shared similar views about the role, process, practice and benefits of SR. They:

- Recognized the value and importance of SR in thinking, decision-making and increasing overall self-awareness.
- Practiced SR virtually every day, though their approaches varied.
- Identified similar barriers to productive SR, including: 1) ego or excessive self-criticism, 2) constant time pressures and 3) lack of supervisory or organizational support for SR.
- Named similar influences SR exerts on their leadership roles, e.g., stronger relationships, better decision-making, richer communications and a healthier balance and outlook.
- Used SR to deal with shared issues in the workplace, such as managing difficult relationships, resolving client disputes, building teams and managing crises.
- Confirmed the value of mentors and the ways in which they can influence leadership development, as well as job preparation and performance.

The PR leaders also expressed some differences, by country, in SR perceptions and processes, though most were more/less, not either/or differences. Four were more meaningful:

- The Russians used the *me-reflection* approach (a nearly total focus on the self), while North Americans used the *we-reflection* approach (incorporating others in their SR).
- The Russians raised far more concerns about “dangerous” SR, or excessive self-criticism that can slow down a decision-making process, while North Americans saw the SR journey as a positive step, an accelerating trip that leads to an ever-brighter horizon in their work and social lives.

- The Americans strongly valued the role and influence of mentors, whom they suggested were the “best” SR teachers, while Russians emphasized the role of classical and educational literature in their SR development.
- North American leaders tended to approach SR holistically by using multiple methods (e.g., self-talk, reading, seeking feedback), while Russians tended to use an atomistic approach by focusing on a single approach.

In short, North American and Russian leaders share similar ideas about the concept, practice and value of SR. However, as the differences above suggest, SR is one concept that operates somewhat differently in the two systems: the texture and scope of SR provides varying levels of value and meaningfulness to leaders in the two countries.

The study’s richest contributions are the practical, actionable implications for improving SR capabilities and practices among professionals, educators and students. The most valuable may be a six-step strategic SR process that describes how to prepare mentally for SR, and then to plan and carry out insights from the introspection. Another rich implication for mentors and mentees is a “questioning approach,” which teaches meaningful self-inquiry: mentors ask thoughtful questions to help mentees reach answers, rather than simply answering their questions. Study participants also suggested seven “building blocks” to stimulate and improve student SR in the classroom. Overall, the study sheds new light on SR in PR leadership practice and development and provides actionable implications for practice and education.

### **Introduction**

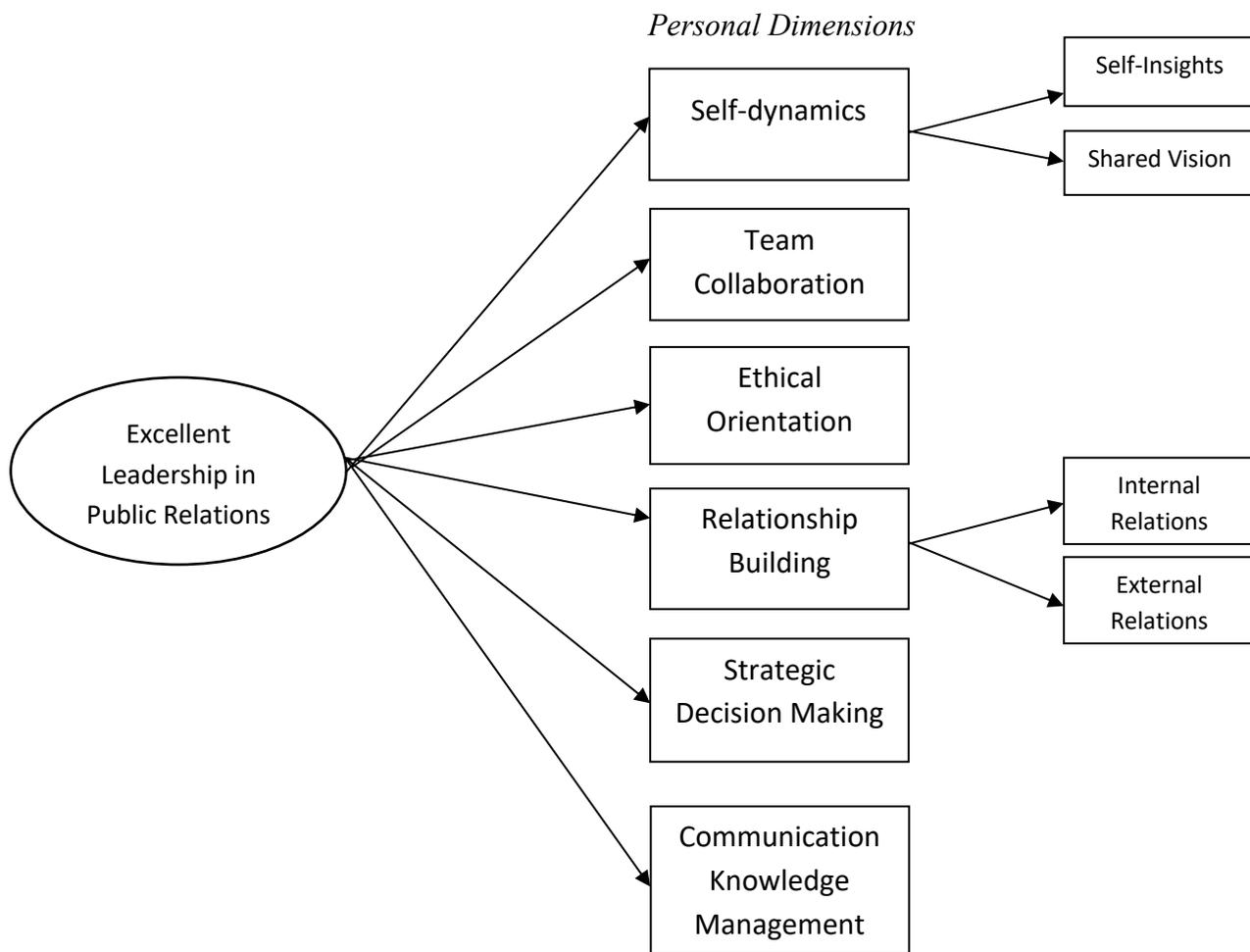
The value of self-awareness has been recognized for at least two millennia. In ancient Greece, “know thyself” was inscribed on the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, and Greek philosophers believed self-knowledge was the highest form of knowledge and crucial to critical thinking and self-improvement. However, the quest for self-knowledge, and for understanding and “finding” ourselves, is difficult. The ancient Greek philosopher, Thales, claimed that knowing thyself was the “most difficult thing to do.” The easiest thing, he said, was “to give others advice.”

Self-awareness and reflection remain highly valued today, and a growing number of studies in the past 40 years have revealed many potential and powerful benefits of self-awareness. *Self-awareness* is “the ability to see ourselves clearly—to understand who we are, how others see us and how we fit into the world” (Eurich, 2017, p. 3). *Self-reflection* (SR) is the primary way we examine ourselves and how others see us. It is deliberate, conscious introspection to better understand our thoughts, experiences and emotions—to become aware of them, learn from them and increase self-awareness.

Self-reflection can be a transformative experience through which we examine who we are and our values, question our assumptions, and come to an altered awareness and sense of identity. SR and increased self-awareness also advance our emotional intelligence (EI) by helping us recognize and understand our emotions, listen better and be more empathetic (Goleman, 1995). SR deepens critical-thinking, improves communications and decision-making, builds confidence and enriches relationships and leadership capabilities (Miller, 2013). In addition, SR may render us better workers and team players, who are less likely to lie, cheat and steal (Eurich, 2017).

Despite the importance of SR and self-awareness, little research has been conducted regarding reflection in and by PR and communication leaders (Mules, 2018). However, the integrated model of leadership in public relations (Meng & Berger, 2013), provides a theoretical framework for such study as it underscores far more directly than other models in the field the importance of self-awareness and self-reflection in public relations leadership. This model has been thoroughly developed, tested and validated in studies in 10 countries and regions in the past decade by researchers associated with the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations (Meng, 2009; Berger & Meng, 2010; Meng, Berger, Gower & Heyman, 2102; Meng & Berger, 2013; and Berger & Meng, 2014). The model (Figure 1) includes six personal dimensions, or competency categories for PR leaders: 1) self-dynamics, 2) team collaboration, 3) ethical orientation, 4) relationship building, 5) strategic decision making and 6) communication knowledge management.

**Figure 1: An Integrated Model of Excellent Leadership in Public Relation**



Self-reflection is explicit in the *self-dynamics* dimension, which includes the sub dimensions of *visioning* and *self-insights*. In this sense, self-insights refer to the extent to which PR leaders understand their own strengths and weaknesses *and* understand PR environments to successfully adapt strategies and tactics to achieve organizational goals. Self-reflection is the process that helps build self-awareness and knowledge that can be put into subsequent actions and reflected in behaviors and communications by public relations leaders.

Self-reflection is an implicit component of the other dimensions, too. For example, self-awareness converted into desired behaviors and actions may help enrich one's *team leadership capabilities* and *relationship-building skills* with internal and external individuals and groups. It also may help shape and enhance *ethical behaviors* in the organization, as well as strengthen *strategic decision-making capabilities* and overall *communication knowledge management*.

In short, SR appears to be a crucial driver of both continuous learning and improvement in the competency categories in this leadership model. Thus, it's worthwhile to examine self-reflection in communication leaders in more depth, as corresponding research findings may provide development guidelines to enrich leadership at all levels in the field.

### **Literature Review**

Developmental psychologists trace self-reflection's roots to infancy – to the end of the first year (Marcovitch, Jacques, Boseovski, & Zelazo, 2008). However, this does not imply that self-reflection and self-awareness are easy-to-develop abilities. Eurich (2017) stated that among thousands of people surveyed around the world, her team identified only 50 individuals who were able to dramatically increase both *internal* and *external* self-awareness. The former is “an inward understanding of your values, passions, aspirations, ideal environment, patterns, reactions and impact on others.” The latter is “understanding yourself from the outside in – that is, knowing how other people see you” (p. 8). Mezirow (2000) argued that adolescents might be able to learn to critically reflect on assumptions of others, while the ability to reflect on one's own assumptions is likely to occur in adults.

Given that the ability to reflect is not an inherent attribute, the development of a reflective leader (Roberts, 2008) is not an option but a necessity for many occupations, especially those that claim to be a profession (Mules, 2018). However, a study found that popular PR textbooks do not address the importance of reflective practices (Mules, 2018). In addition, a review of PR scholarship revealed that “[W]hile the value of reflection is widely recognised at a theoretical or philosophical level there is very little research into the role of formal reflection in the daily practice of public relations practitioners and public relations curricula” (Mules, 2018, p. 175).

#### *Controversy of self-reflection*

Not all self-reflection practices are healthy. Avolio and Wernsing (2008) distinguished between *adaptive* and *maladaptive* self-reflection. The former is “a form of critical thinking, involving examination and evaluation that results in insights (aha! moments) and learning about the self,” while the latter is “spending time ruminating what and why things went wrong and never deriving positive lessons learned” (p. 159). Further, Watkins (2013) emphasized that reflection is a thought process motivated by epistemic curiosity; in contrast, rumination might be driven by perceived injustices toward the self. In her turn, Eurich (2017) called rumination “introspection's evil twin” (p. 118) and argued that “ruminators are so busy beating themselves up that they neglect to think about how they might be showing up to others” (p. 120). Through a

series of experiments, Hixon and Swann (1993) found that to foster self-insight, individuals should keep reflection to modest amounts.

Simsek (2013) argued that self-rumination and the need for absolute truth (defined as a motivation to gain absolute knowledge about the self) might lead to depression and anxiety. An attempt to find one's "true self" undermines the search for other possible interpretations of the situation that the individual experiences. A recommendation is to avoid general and decontextualized evaluations and focus instead on concrete and immediate processes (Simsek, 2013). According to Ayduk and Kross (2010), to facilitate adaptive self-reflection, one needs to avoid a self-immersing perspective in favor of a *self-distancing* approach, or "step back" and analyze personal experiences from an observer's angle. Eurich (2017) suggested a *What Not Why* approach: While reflecting on self-relevant events, one should ask *what* questions instead of *why* questions. She argued that "asking 'what' keeps us open to discovering new information about ourselves, even if that information is negative or in conflict with our existing beliefs. Asking 'why' has an essentially opposite effect" (p. 109).

#### *Approaches to self-reflection*

According to Eurich (2017), "self-awareness is a surprisingly developable skill" (p. 9). A review of literature suggests that this skill can be developed through a number of approaches, and their combination.

Over the past 30 years, hundreds of studies have demonstrated physical and psychological benefits of *expressive* (personal and emotional) writing (Pennebaker, 2018). One of the most recent study assessed effects of expressive writing in a sample of organizational leaders (Lanaj, Foulk, & Erez, 2018). The leaders were engaged in a morning self-reflection through expressive writing that focused on their leadership qualities, skills and achievements. As a result, leaders experienced less depletion and more work engagement on intervention days. In addition, because of an increased work engagement, leaders improved prosocial impact and clout and thus, enhanced their influence at work. Lanaj et al. (2018) explained that self-reflection through expressive writing helps leaders (1) better understand themselves and increase awareness of their needs and priorities, and (2) free their inner resources and invest energy into daily activities. Overall, Lanaj et al. (2018) argued that "positive leader self-reflection matters for how leaders think and feel" (p. 7).

Based on empirical evidence and theory, literary texts might trigger self-reflection if descriptions of characters and events recall personal experiences and reading evokes emotional response to the characters (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). In this regard, Zavisca (2005) noted, "The classics remain essential to a high-status reading repertoire" in Russia (p. 1247).

Roberts (2008) advocated for *dialogue* as a means to share experiences and insights, whether thorough a face-to-face communication or electronically (via email or online discussion boards and chat rooms). Mezirow (1997) argued that individuals engage in discourse or a dialogue to reflect critically on actions, evidence, arguments and points of view. Further, engaging in psychotherapy is a way to improve self-reflection and consequently, self-awareness. However, empirical evidence has demonstrated that the quality of a relationship between a therapist and a client contributes to a successful outcome more than therapeutic techniques (Lyke, 2009).

In discussing SR types, researchers emphasized that there are two main types of self-reflection: First is a solution-focused approach that individuals use to reflect on best ways to

reach their goals; second is a self-focused approach that includes reflections on emotions, cognitions and behavior (Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002). Grant et al. (2002) also argued that individuals commonly use the two approaches conjointly, but still preferring one style over the other. A variety of available approaches to self-reflection makes it easier to select a reflection process that matches an individual's preferences (Porter, 2017).

#### *Self-reflection: Benefits and Barriers*

Kail (2012) argued that “self-reflection” might sound as “self-involved,” but in reality, this concept implies opposite: “It is the process of properly unpacking ourselves as leaders for the good of others.” Leaders who do not reflect might fall into a narcissistic rationalization of their actions instead of analyzing and learning from them. In short, self-reflection is a required practice for the process of leadership growth and, in the words of Kail (2012), “gaining wisdom from an experience.”

Self-awareness and reflection are key components in authentic leadership development as they drive the development of moral capacity, moral courage, and moral resiliency. The three abilities influence leaders' decision-making and behavior (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). Awareness of and critical reflection on (personal) generalized biases is one of the ways of transformative learning: “Self-reflection can lead to significant personal transformation” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). However, this transformative process is filled with obstacles that might prevent individuals from a meaningful self-reflection (Eurich, 2017). The barriers include such “inner roadblocks” as a (perceived) shortage of time, a lack of understanding of the process and its benefits (Porter, 2017), being delusional about personal traits (Eurich, 2017), among others. In addition, Eurich (2017) pointed out that an “insidious societal obstacle” – “the cult of self” (p. 73) – impedes self-awareness as an inflated self-esteem make individuals feel special about themselves and blinds them to the truth about their capabilities.

#### *Self-reflection and mentoring*

Speaking of authentic leaders, Avolio and Wernsing (2008) stressed the need to dedicate time for self-reflection to understand “best possible self” and encourage followers to do the same. Mentors are able to facilitate reflection by asking mentees seemingly simple – “what” and “why” – questions (Kail, 2012). Coached reflection, or a formal help an individual receives during a difficult situation to work through and learn from the situation, is an essential component of both coaching and mentoring (Day et al., 2009). In other words, mentors' help is vital during what Eurich (2017) called *alarm clock events* or “situations that open our eyes to important self-truths” (p. 44). These trigger moments can be negative, neutral or positive (Avolio & Wernsing, 2008).

Although it might appear that a success does not require self-reflection, it would be a mistake to avoid analyzing thoughts, feelings and behaviors related to the success. By reflecting, leaders might be able to overcome such a natural tendency as attributing “our successes to ourselves and all our failures to forces beyond our control” (Kail, 2012). Mezirow (1997) argued that “Thinking as an autonomous and responsible agent is essential for full citizenship in democracy and for moral decision making in situations of rapid change” (p. 7). The educator or mentor assures that learners achieve this goal by creating a supportive environment to help mentees develop critical reflectivity and self-confidence to “take action on reflective insights” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 25).

Building on these and other insights from a substantial base of previous research, this study focuses on public relations leaders in North America and Russia to try to answer five research questions related to self-reflection:

1. To what extent do communication leaders use self-reflection to increase self-awareness and insights?
2. How do communication leaders conduct self-reflection, or what process(es) or approach(es) do they use to increase self-awareness?
3. What are the key barriers to more, or more meaningful self-reflection?
4. What are the practical benefits of self-reflection for leaders in their roles in the workplace?
5. Is self-reflection linked, or important to successful mentoring, and, if so, how/why?

### **Method**

This study used interviews to gather data to assess the questions. A relevant interview guide (see an interview guide in the Appendix) was prepared, tested and revised for use. North America and Russia were selected for the research due to their strongly differing leadership styles, economies, cultures and government decision-making processes. These differences create the potential for greater variance in findings, thereby enriching research insights. Previous comparative research studies of Russia and N. America demonstrate such variance (Erzikova & Berger, 2011).

The researchers worked in the communication industry in Russia and the U.S. for many years and capitalized on their personal/professional networks while reaching out to prospective study participants. Fifteen PR leaders in each area were recruited via snowball sampling. They were interviewed for an average of 45 minutes via telephone/Skype or in person. The interviews were recorded and transcribed as a basis for qualitative analysis.

Data were analyzed using guidelines outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). First, researchers worked independently while identifying patterns in data collected in their respective countries. Second, they exchanged preliminary findings to assess the adequacy of analysis. Third, the researchers screened both data sets to categorize differences and similarities. The authors were guided by Mills, Van de Bunt, and De Bruijn's (2006) premise that "Comparisons not only uncover differences between social entities but reveal unique aspects of a particular entity that would be virtually impossible to detect otherwise" (p. 621).

#### *Russian Sample*

All 15 participants were Russian citizens; one participant had a dual citizenship. They represented four different regions. Nine respondents were women and six – men. Ages ranged from 25 to 63, and the average age was 43. Years of experience of interviewees varied from five to 20 years. Average length of interviews was 46 minutes (range of 22-87 minutes). Seven participants were agency heads/owners; five worked for a for-profit company; two were employed by consultancies and one respondent worked for an NGO.

#### *North American Sample*

The sample included 14 U.S. citizens and one Canadian. Eight respondents were women and seven were men. Ages ranged from 38 to 72, and the average age was 57. All participants were experienced PR specialists with 20-30 years of experience. Interviews averaged 45 minutes

(range of 35-53minutes). A majority (12/15) has worked in two types of organizations; 8/15 worked in three or four types (agency, company, NP, education, foundation). Respondents included four current or former national association leaders, two foundation leaders, two agency heads, four CCOs or SVPs, and three retired company or agency leaders.

### **Findings**

This study provides empirical support for the vital role of SR in PR leaders in Russia and North America. Depth interviews revealed self-reflection enriches the six personal dimensions of the integrated model of leadership in public relations (Meng & Berger, 2013), notably self-dynamics, team leadership, ethical orientation, relationship-building skills and strategic decision-making capability. The interviews also 1) documented that PR leaders in the two regions shared many similar views about the role, process, practice and benefits of SR, and 2) highlighted some important differences, as reflected in the following analysis of the five research questions.

#### **RQ 1: To what extent do communication leaders use self-reflection to increase self-awareness and insights?**

##### *Similarities*

All interviewed leaders recognized the value and importance of SR in thinking, decision-making and increasing overall self-awareness which could enhance leadership skills and capacity. For both samples, SR is a future-oriented endeavor. As an example, a Russian female said, “Any success or failure should be carefully analyzed with an eye on what we can use in the future.” North American and Russian respondents practice SR virtually every day, though SR processes varied.

##### *Differences*

North Americans tend to see the SR journey as a positive experience - *dangerous not to have* – and they hit mostly “green lights” on the journey. The challenges along the way are to take the time to reflect meaningfully, and then to put their insights into actions. SR leads to enlightened momentum, better performance, and greater satisfaction.

Russians are more cautionary: they see the advantages and values of SR, but they feel one can go too far or too fast, so their journey is marked by “yellow, cautionary signs.” Taken too far, SR can become “dostoevshina,” a painful self-examination, or excessive self-criticism (Severskaya, 2015). This “self-digging” can be a destructive form of SR because it tends to focus on PR as a manipulative communication process, intended to deceive in order to “win.” Several leaders argued that PR professionals do not or should not look inside themselves and examine their work too closely. A male participant said, “PR is knowledge that you use to manipulate people. If you start thinking why I manipulate and what it will result into, conscience wakes up. PR is ruled by money, too. For money, you can write about flowers or kill people.”

Russian leaders also described SR as a process of self-examination focused (almost) completely on the self: Who am I? What did I say or do? How did I manage something? What is my future? What are my strengths and weaknesses? Some said they discuss themselves with a psychotherapist or mentor, but five said they’ve never had a mentor. Given this *me*-reflection approach, most attribute their success to themselves, not to others. A male respondent with

impressive careers in journalism and PR said, “It was mainly me who facilitated success. I was observing others and drew conclusions.”

North American leaders characterized their self-reflection more as *we*-reflection. One female said, “Self-reflection is too ‘I-focused.’ I think ‘we-reflection’ or ‘us-reflection’ is more appropriate.” Another lady said, “My mother taught me to try to understand others before being understood.” They focus on themselves (internal SR) and on others (external SR) with whom they interact. They ask questions about others, e.g., what were the effects of my words or actions on others? How were others impacted by my decisions or behaviors? Or, as one man suggested, using a boating analogy, what does my “wake” look like to others? They also attribute much of their SR development and professional success, to the positive contributions and influences of others—notably mentors and parents—with whom they reflect at times.

## **RQ 2: How do communication leaders conduct self-reflection, or what process or approach(es) do they use to increase self-awareness?**

### *Similarities*

Interviews with North American and Russian participants revealed some overlaps in their approaches to SR. Both groups use writing, taking notes, reading, and thinking about important events and meetings as methods that spur SR.

### *Differences*

In practice, the Russians approach SR in terms of private thinking about themselves. Five respondents said consulting with a psychotherapist was a primary method because, as one female explained, “Friends always take your side, while a psychologist is unbiased.” Several said they wrote in a journal, or diary. One respondent admitted that writing a journal is like taking out the dirty linen. Even though “sharing bad things” about himself “with the paper” is not easy, he does it dutifully because “writing is part of SR.”

Several said they reflect on inspirational lives of great leaders who are *passionaries*, or individuals with super energy (Gumilev, 2001). Clearly, they are role models and virtual mentors for the participants. Classical literature was one of the primary spurs to SR. A female respondent said, “Russian classical literature – Chekhov, Kuprin, Dostoevsky – is about a monologue, this literature taught me how to create a dialogue with myself. This literature read at early age and re-read many times impacted me most.” Overall, it appeared that Russian leaders’ efforts seemed to focus in-depth on one or two SR tactics.

To help students become more capable with SR, they recommended writing in journals, reading books on self-awareness, following role models, or finding a coach or therapist. SR appears to be a largely solo journey for Russian leaders.

North Americans leaders described more than 20 approaches they used in SR. Like the Russians, they often reflect when they are alone—traveling to and from work, walking or exercising, waiting at airports and so forth. Several said they wrote in journals, too, but most described multiple SR approaches they used. One man, for example, said he did SR when driving to work, then by walking around and getting feedback from others at work, and occasionally scheduling time on his own calendar for brief reflections at work.

Two female leaders described a more holistic approach that involved 1) daily “self-talks,” 2) inspired religious readings or journal writing, 3) seeking and processing feedback from team members, and 4) reflective discussions with spouses or close colleagues. Such combinations of

approaches and the involvement of others in their SR, made the practice appear to be a more formal, holistic approach to self-awareness.

North Americans also suggested a rich mix of ideas to help students develop SR capabilities in the classroom, including specific case studies, depth project debriefs, personality assessments, and Socratic teaching. Several suggested changing the structure of the course to incorporate SR in each class session, not just a topic for one or two sessions.

### **RQ 3: What are the key barriers to more, or more effective self-reflection?**

#### *Similarities*

North American and Russian leaders identified similar barriers to productive SR, including: 1) the problem of ego, which may replace honest SR with self-glorification, 2) constant time pressures, and 3) the lack of supervisory or organizational support for SR.

Ego was the biggest barrier. North American leaders described it in several ways: “It gets in the way of being honest with the self;” “it hides our blind spots and keeps us blind to our weaknesses;” “it blocks clear and thoughtful thinking;” “it prevents opening ourselves to scrutiny by others;” “it inflates self-worth and diminishes trust and support;” and “it prevents learning, growth and improvement.” The Russians believed some leaders do not reflect to avoid pain associated with hurtful self-discoveries. A woman said if people want to overcome a fear of hurting their egos, they should understand that “SR is about awareness and not about judging.” However, another respondent believed that “effective SR cannot be without pain.”

Several North Americans argued that leaders with out-of-control egos are really communicating to people that they are right, they know all, and there’s no need for improvement: “I am perfect, thank you.” SR is meaningless if people cannot be honest with themselves. Three Russians mentioned a “crown that a leader puts on himself” while discussing a highly inflated self-esteem that impedes personal development and advancement.

Regarding time, the pressures of 24/7 work life in the high-tech communication profession make it difficult to take the time to SR. The intense pressure to constantly do and produce, and to do more and more with less and less, represents a real barrier to thoughtful reflection in both samples. In addition, this reality makes it easier to avoid SR by claiming that you just don’t have the time.

Organizational and/or national culture was seen as a factor which can spur or impede SR. As one U.S male respondent said, “Organizational culture and climate can be big barriers or big drivers of SR.” Emotional isolation, group think, the high expectations for productivity, and the constant pressure to do and produce were also suggested. A Russian female called a culture at her organization “enlightened feudalism” (an overt autocratic managerial culture). Several Russians, who are organizational leaders, said they strive to be democratic leaders. For example, they collect feedback from subordinates and assure everyone is heard and appreciated. Feedback serves as a reason for SR.

#### *Differences*

Two Russian leaders believed they did not have any barriers to effective SR. One woman mentioned an excessive reflection – “sawing sawdust” as a significant barrier. Two females said rude bosses who systematically belittle them were the main obstacle. Another respondent

mentioned that PR as an occupation “is still at the level of earning money” and does not focus enough on professional leadership development.

North American leaders cited lack of diversity as a potential problem: “The lack of diversity, or surrounding yourself with others just like you, may reduce or block deeper SR. If everyone looks and thinks alike, that’s a problem,” a female corporate leader said. Another issue addressed by the Americans related to a lack of knowledge on how to conduct meaningful SR—they’ve never really learned or developed approaches and capabilities.

#### **RQ 4: What are the practical benefits of self-reflection for leaders in their roles in the workplace?**

##### *Similarities*

North American and Russian leaders recognized the same kinds of positive influences that SR exerts on their current leadership roles, e.g., greater self-awareness, stronger relationships, better decision-making, richer communications and a healthier balance and outlook. They reported using SR to deal with shared issues in the workplace: managing difficult relationships with employees or bosses, building teams, managing crises, reducing stress and anxiety and so forth.

North American and Russian professionals described a variety of ways in which SR influences their current role and work, which is to say the impact of SR may be both broad and deep. Two primary themes of influence emerged.

First, SR strengthens overall leadership capabilities and performance. In this regard, decision making and relationship building (with teams, colleagues and clients) were cited by more than half of the U.S. interviewees. For example, one corporate leader said, “SR greatly helps my strategic decision making and thinking, building more productive relationships and creating a team climate of openness, sharing and feedback.” Another said, “I have a stronger base with SR—decision making, relationship building, more self-confidence. SR provides me with a deeper understanding of the environment or situation.” Two others added the human element: “SR helps me be a better leader because it makes me more empathetic to others,” one corporate leader said, while another noted, “SR is a mirror you can look into and see yourself in relation to others and your own core values.”

Three Russian respondents said SR helped them build more effective relationships with their teams by “not only assigning tasks but also discussing the tasks with staffers” and better “planning your own resources and developing a project strategy.” One female participant linked leadership and self-reflection: “Leadership is the ability to lead and motivate people to accomplish goals.” Self-reflection helped her understand whether she was a good motivator for her team.

Second, SR provides greater clarity and direction, and a healthier mental outlook, or satisfaction. A U.S. professional with experience across companies, agencies and nonprofits said, “SR has helped me build teams and trust, and improve my leadership. There’s an important personal benefit, too: I feel better emotionally, spiritually, just more holistic.”

Three Russian leaders emphasized the value of SR as a critical assessment of themselves and understanding an impact of leadership performance on others. One of them said, “SR helped me become more self-aware about the fact that I am not always right, not all my decisions are

correct. SR helps me understand how my actions are viewed by others.” A male respondent linked SR and self-control:

*I have been managing an agency for 15 years. History shows when nobody is above a CEO, he becomes flighty and despotic. I am, to the degree, a small Mao Zedong. This is why self-control is a must. People who surround me depend on me.*

A female leader echoed him by saying that SR helped her control her negative emotions and cultivate positive emotions that are “a moving force for people’s aspirations to develop new ideas and implement interesting projects.” Another female said the ability to stay calm and focus better on a task at hand is critical for effective employee management and professional growth.

### *Differences*

Two Russian respondents believed SR facilitated their development as mentors. One of them said SR helped him focus more on values than skills while mentoring newcomers. An agency head said that SR facilitated the development of a strong ethical orientation to guide a choice of clients and staffers.

North American participants underscored such benefits of SR as dealing effectively with difficult clients and becoming “more empathetic and a better listener.” Several mentioned that confidence is an SR outcome. As one U.S. professional said, “SR helps me prioritize and gain confidence and direction. It’s a check post, a listening post and a directional signal, all at once.”

### **RQ 5: Is self-reflection linked, or important to successful mentoring, and, if so, how/why?**

### *Similarities*

North American and Russian leaders confirmed the potential value of mentors and the ways in which they can influence experience-driven leadership development, as well as job preparation and performance. Both groups emphasized that mentorship goes beyond coaching and/or skills training and includes personal support or even friendship.

### *Differences*

North American PR leaders said mentors played prominent roles in the development of their SR capabilities and processes. Russian PR leaders, however, said the influences of mentors are less distinct. Two-thirds of the Americans said their mentors stimulated and helped them develop SR skills. On the other hand, half of the Russians said that literature or various self-help books inspired or spurred their SR development. One captured the power of literature in this way: “Classical literature, especially Russian... well, not just Russian... Classical literature is based on SR. Classical literature explains motives and actions of characters. Not just describes their actions, but gets inside... It makes us think about ‘outside vs. inside’.” It appeared a virtual mentorship or guidance acquired from famous thinkers and writers through reading their books had a special role in leadership development of the Russians.

All of the Americans agreed that a “good questioning” approach their mentors used was a powerful driver of their own SR. In this approach, mentors asked questions to help mentees find answers, rather than simply telling them the answer. Collectively, their answers yielded a six-step strategic SR process. They saw mentors as the best SR teachers.

Russians supported the idea that mentors could and did help mentees develop SR skills, but it was more qualified. One third indicated they never had a mentor. When participants were asked if/how they helped their mentees develop their SR skills, all North Americans said “yes,” and most said they did it in the same way their mentors had. “I try to emulate my mentors,” one said. The majority of Russians also said they help their mentors develop SR capabilities, but in more specific ways, e.g., launch their careers, evaluate results, run an agency, encourage creativity and share inspirational stories.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The interviews confirmed the importance and value of SR among diverse PR leaders in two countries. They said they practice SR about every day and described more than 20 approaches they used to self-reflect, often alone but sometimes with others.

Data analysis revealed the process of self-reflection is explicit and implicit in the six personal dimensions of the integrated model of leadership in public relations (Meng & Berger, 2013). Self-reflection helps enhance the ability to:

- use one’s personal and professional strengths to effectively contribute to organizational goals (self-dynamics);
- work with others to positively support the public relations function and the organization (team leadership and collaboration capabilities);
- commit to professional values and standards when philosophical and legal dilemmas arise or responsibilities and loyalties conflict (ethical orientation);
- share network resources, build connections and cultivate relationships with key stakeholders to facilitate mutual benefits for the organization and its publics (relationship-building skills);
- understand external sociopolitical environments and internal organizational structures, processes and practices, and the ability to translate that knowledge into effective advocacy and organizational progress (strategic decision-making capability); and
- seek out, organize and effectively apply public relations knowledge to enhance the organization’s overall communications effectiveness (communication knowledge management and expertise).

Overall, both Russian and U.S. participants strongly indicated that self-reflection facilitates leadership development and a positive organizational environment. Future research is warranted to investigate differences between the two samples, the most substantial being the *me-reflection* approach used by the Russians (a nearly total focus on the self) versus the *we-reflection* approach used by North Americans (incorporating others in their SR). Also, Russians raised far more concerns about “dangerous” SR, or excessive self-criticism, while North Americans more strongly valued the role and influence of mentors, whom they suggested were the “best” SR teachers.

Following Mules (2018), we seek to move from philosophical levels of support for SR, to the practice itself among professionals to identify specific approaches that might advance the use and development of SR in the profession and the classroom. In this regard, three major implications emerged from our analysis of the data in this study: 1) a six-step strategic SR process, 2) a “questioning approach,” Socratic in nature, used by some mentors and supervisors,

and 3) a number of specific suggestions for enriching SR practice and understanding in education.

### *1. The Strategic Self-Reflection Process*

A strategic six-step SR process model emerged in the collective findings. It bears implications for practice and education, and provides a pathway to more meaningful SR.

1. **Make time for SR.** It's too important to be too busy. It's difficult getting started, but SR can become part of your daily routine. Walking, exercising, tending the garden, riding to work, reading books, writing in a diary—choose an approach that works best for you.
2. **Create the “right” mindset.** Like *putting on a game face*, in SR we must create a mental space where SR fills the foreground. We can't empty our brains, but we can adjust focus.
3. **Be self-honest and balance your assessment.** This is the most difficult step, and two issues are involved. First, don't let ego overpower your self-critique and, second, don't let self-criticism (rumination) lead to inaction or loss of confidence.
4. **Formulate actions** based on your assessment and evaluation. Calendar them. Consider discussing them with a mentor or colleague.
5. **Carry out actions.** Be professional, timely and authentic. Rehearsing the actions to test and refine them may be useful.
6. **Self-reflect on the outcomes** and renew the cycle. Writing things down may help at this point. Over time, this process becomes routine.

Individuals can use this process, and mentors and teachers can help students and young professionals frame each step with relevant questions to ask the self along the way.

### *2. The Questioning Approach: Asking not Telling*

This mentoring approach, a variation of Socratic teaching, guides meaningful self-inquiry, which was described by a handful of participants as a mentor's most valuable role. Good questioning means asking tough and thoughtful questions, the right *what*, *why* and *how* questions, and the questions we might not ask ourselves—rather than simply answering questions that mentees raise. Both North American and Russian PR leaders described this approach, and most North Americans said they had modelled this approach from their own mentors. Rather than directly answer mentee questions, they would ask questions like these:

- Have you thought about this aspect?
- What other approaches have you considered?
- How might others react to your proposed words or actions?
- Where else might you turn for more information or alternate ideas?
- What values would your actions (or words) express?
- How would you assess the impact of your behavior on others?

This questioning approach teaches meaningful self-inquiry, as one North American leader said:

Three great mentors have helped me. They asked great questions, sometimes unexpected questions. One taught me true inquiry into myself and others. He always said leaders need to carefully consider how others see them in order to better understand themselves. Another North American said:

On a scale of 1-10, mentors are an 11 in what they can do to help. Great mentors ask questions, they listen, and they lead you into your own decisions. Great questions and extraordinary listening: they open doors in your mind.

Socratic teaching spurs critical thinking by asking questions, rather than providing direct answers. One question leads to another, which leads to more. Questions can be raised about goals, the nature of an issue, alternative interpretations, assumptions undergirding positions, values expressed in messages or behaviors, the relevancy of various data and so forth. This approach also deepens insights and enriches decision making, strategic planning, relationship building and communications (Paul & Elder, 2001).

### *3. Building SR Capabilities in the Classroom*

As Mules (2018) suggested, there's room in public relations education for doing far more to help students practice and improve their SR capabilities. In this regard, the professionals we interviewed collectively provided rich suggestions about how to stimulate interest in SR and begin to build SR capabilities and insights in the classroom. Here are seven of their suggestions, or what we call "building blocks," for SR:

1. The foundation block is a firm commitment to developing students' SR capabilities. Structure entire courses to include SR moments and practices into each class session, rather than highlighting SR in a single class session.
2. Use Socratic teaching more often—less lecturing and more listening and questioning to stimulate critical-thinking and draw out ideas and underlying assumptions.
3. Employ great literature, poetry, films, art and music to help students project their feelings and emotions and trigger journal writing, creative thinking and discussions about the self, dreams, hopes, values and behaviors.
4. Conduct depth debriefs of projects, decisions and actions. Exhaust the *who*, *what* and *what if* questions. Engage all students.
5. Sharpen self-insights and team-insights with assessment tools like Strength/Finders, Myers-Briggs, Conflict Dynamics Profile or others. Highlight team leadership factors.
6. Examine reoccurring workplace questions: Do my words and actions reflect core values? How do I contribute to team culture? How can I develop a better work relationship with my boss? How do others see my actions and behaviors?
7. Use a "calendar approach" to help students reflect on and rehearse important, upcoming events or challenges. This builds SR skills and reinforces the action dimension.

### **Conclusion: More Research in Self-Reflection**

This study examined the important but little-studied topic of SR among public relations leaders in North America and Russia. Many believe, philosophically, that SR is important for leaders, but this study revealed that PR leaders consider it a key and valuable *driver* of improved performance, decision-making, relationship building and impactful communication. The leader participants used diverse approaches to SR, which they practice and benefit from daily. They also described the rich implications of self-reflection for practice and education, which may be the greatest value of the study.

Nevertheless, this was a qualitative study of SR in public relations leaders, based on perceptions of 30 leaders across two regions. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized. In addition, the sample was intended to be somewhat diverse and representative, but in the end most

senior leaders interviewed were Caucasians. Even with just two regions, however, some important cultural differences were noted, and larger studies across diverse cultures would likely uncover more differences and insights.

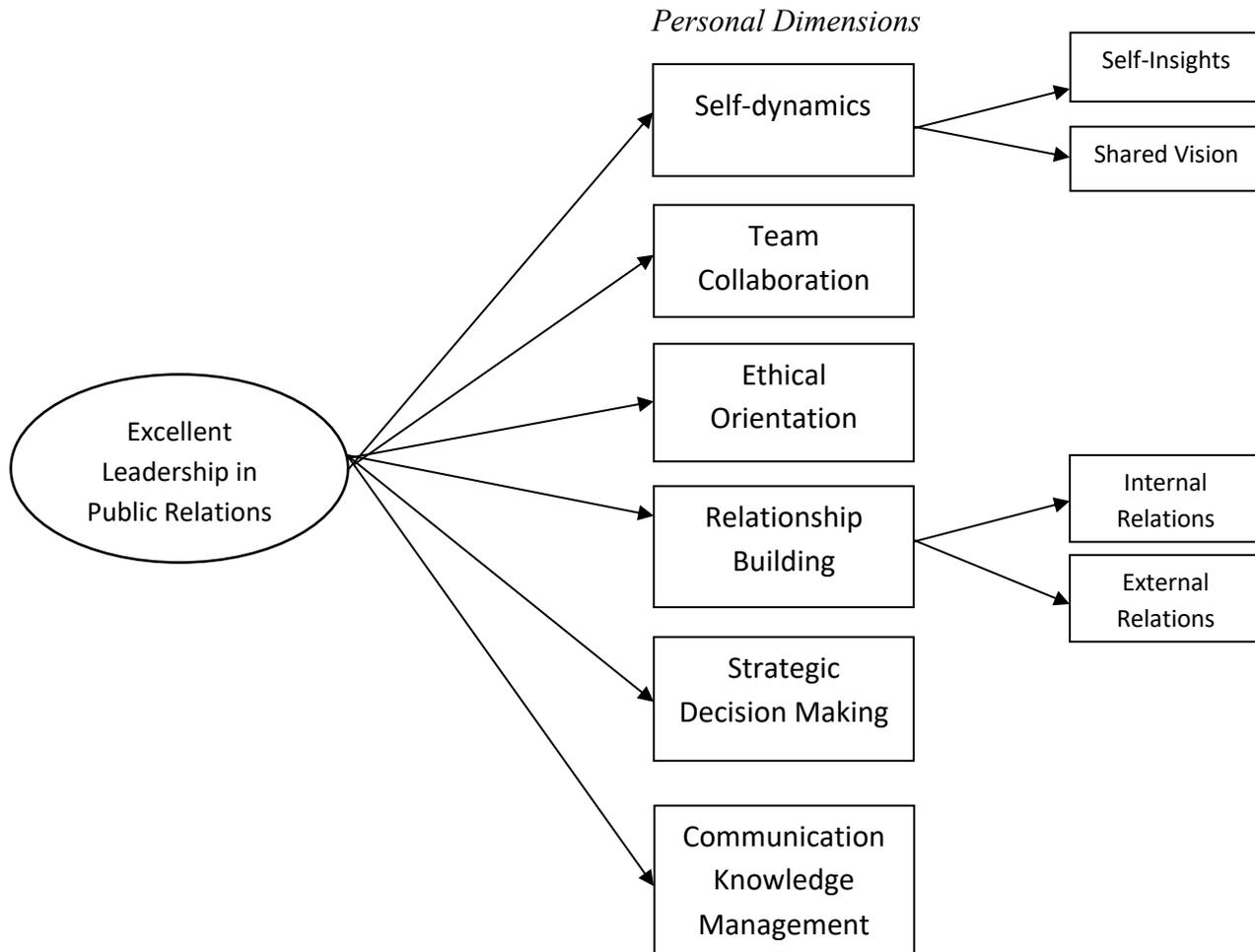
In the end, the study provides intriguing findings and suggestions that may help frame and design future quantitative, more in-depth studies about SR. Many studies in other fields have confirmed the great value of SR for leaders and professionals, suggesting that SR may be the difference between *good* and *great* leadership. The PR profession and related education programs would benefit greatly from more SR research to identify best SR practices in practice, teaching and mentoring. SR may or may not be the big difference maker between good and great leadership, but it surely carries some weight in making a difference. More research can shine a light on this crucial, albeit often invisible leadership capability and practice.

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Figure 1: An Integrated Model of Excellent Leadership in Public Relation



**Reference for this model:**

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions for the Self-Reflection Study**

1. When you hear the term “self-reflection,” define what that term means for you.
2. Is self-reflection important for leaders? Why or why not?
3. To what extent do you self-reflect about your work life (life in general)?
4. Please describe your SR process or approach...
5. At what point in life did you begin to self-reflect in a meaningful way? Why? What or who initiated it? Bridge past situations with current situations that make them self-reflect.
6. What are some barriers to productive self-reflection?
7. Practically speaking, how does self-reflection, and increased self-awareness, help you in your current leadership role?
8. Please share two examples of how SR helped you deal with specific experiences, events, emotions, issues and so forth. Be as detailed as possible.
9. Did any person, workshop, training program, reading, etc. help you develop your SR capabilities?
10. Does your organization support the development of SR capabilities? If yes, in what ways?
11. Can mentors facilitate SR development? Why or why not? How?
12. Did your mentors help you with SR? If yes, how?
13. Who was/is your most important professional (work-related) mentor?
14. Who was/is your most important life mentor?
15. How have mentors contributed to your success?
16. Do you help those YOU mentor to develop their SR skills? How so?
17. What would you tell students and young professionals about the benefits of SR—and how to go about self-reflecting?
18. Do mentorship and leadership overlap in your mind?
19. At this point in your career, are there still areas of leadership that you are still learning, acquiring or striving to improve?
20. Recent studies, including the Plank Center Report Card on PR Leaders, reveal large gaps between how PR leaders view their performance and how their employees do. Leaders think they are doing a far better job than do their employees. Why do you think this gap exists? Can SR play a role in closing it?
21. Last question: What has been the single greatest benefit for you of SR?