
Always switched on
Exploring reflectivity among public leaders in accelerated times
Barbara van der Steen

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in accelerated times

University of Humanistic Studies

Barbara van der Steen

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Universiteit voor Humanistiek

# Always switched on

## Exploring reflectivity among public leaders in accelerated times

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Prof. dr. M.B. Veenswijk

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*"No man is an island, entire of itself;*
*every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main"*

*Inspired by John Donne, Meditation XVII (1624),*
*as part of Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*

# Index


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Prologue** | *- Providing shelter for the questions of our time* | 11 |
| | References | 13 |
| **Chapter 1** | *Introduction "Always switched on"* | 15 |
| | 1.1 Research aim, main question, and scope | 17 |
| | 1.2 Key concepts and definitions | 17 |
| | 1.3 Research design and methodology | 22 |
| | References | 25 |
| **Chapter 2** | *Literature review; Leadership reflective practices: Adaptive challenges, slow questions, and meaningful relations* | 29 |
| | Chapter summary | 30 |
| | 2.1 Introduction | 31 |
| | 2.2 Literature review on key concepts | 32 |
| | 2.3 Reflective practices further explored | 36 |
| | 2.4 Methodology | 39 |
| | 2.5 Discussion and conclusion | 40 |
| | References | 42 |
| **Chapter 3** | *Phenomenological exploration; Public strategic leaders in accelerated times: A qualitative study on their reflective practices* | 45 |
| | Chapter summary | 46 |
| | 3.1 Introduction | 47 |
| | 3.2 Methodology | 49 |
| | 3.3 Results of the qualitative phenomenological study | 51 |
| | 3.4 Intrapersonal and interpersonal reflective practices | 55 |
| | 3.5 Discussion and conclusion | 56 |
| | References | 60 |

**Chapter 4** *A narrative exploration of a utopic story; Public strategic leaders and their reflective practice in accelerated times* 63

Chapter summary 64

4.1 Introduction 65

4.2 Methodology 66

4.3 Dominant narratives on leadership and reflectivity in the existing theory 67

4.4 Exploration of dominant narratives of public strategic leaders in practice 71

4.5 Discussion and Conclusion 76

References 81

**Chapter 5** *A humanistic exploration; Public strategic leaders under pressure, reflectivity and its social implications* 85

Chapter summary 86

5.1 Introduction and problem statement 87

5.2 Pressures on reflectivity in organisations and sociological shifts 89

5.3 The humanistic approach as normative stance 90

5.4 Methodology 91

5.5 The qualitative exploration among public strategic leaders 93

5.6 In summary, paradoxical findings: Humanistic values under pressure 100

5.7 Discussion and conclusion 101

References 108

**Chapter 6** *Discussion and conclusion* 111

6.1 Overviewing and interpreting the outcomes 112

6.2 Discussion and conclusion 118

References 127

**Appendices**

*Overview of the findings* 132
*Overview of emerging questions, conclusions and further research* 133
*Epilogue- I have no doctrine, I carry on a dialogue* 134
*Summary in Dutch* 138
*Curriculum Vitae* 145
*Dankwoord* 148



# Prologue - Providing shelter for the questions of our time

It was the summer of 2003. With a book under my arm, I wandered along the rocky Italian coast, almost thirty years old and at a crossroad in my life. The book was the diary of Etty Hillesum (1941-1943/2002), a Jewish woman in her late 20s living during the Second World War, handed to me by my mother. "An important book," she had said. "Take it with you."

On a quiet corner overlooking the bay, I opened the book to the first page. I met a dreamy young woman in a townhouse on the Amsterdam Museumplein. She felt almost like a friend, someone exploring her life and inner world through writing, reflecting, and searching, longing for clarity.

Her words mirrored the questions I carried with me. I felt both excitement and discomfort. She, living under the threat of the Nazis. And me, a privileged young woman in complete freedom. How could I feel so connected? She wrote:

> *"I feel rather like a small battlefield on which the questions of this time are being fought out. The only thing one can do is to offer oneself humbly as a battleground. Those questions must have a shelter somewhere, a place where they can 'struggle and come to rest'. And we, 'poor little human beings', must open up our inner space to them and not run away. Perhaps in that respect I am a bit too hospitable…"*
> (author's selection, Hillesum, 1941-1943/2002)

These sentences resonated, word for word. As I read them, something shifted. I felt moved and transformed by this moment of resonance. One passage in particular stayed with me: "The questions of this time must be fought out; they must find shelter through our inner space. We have nothing to do but make ourselves available."

Etty's words helped me see that I also have a challenge and opportunity to face the challenges of my time through my own story and abilities. Nearly twenty years after that encounter, at the onset of COVID-19, I started this research.

By then, I had come to realise that Hillesum's invitation had never really left me. What does it mean to offer shelter to the questions of one's time? How do people remain open to uncertainty? These questions became the starting point for this study. Over the years, I developed a growing sense that the challenges of our time cannot be addressed through technical solutions alone. They also call for people willing to stay with uncertainty and create space for exploration.

Together with more than thirty public leaders, I explored how they offer shelter to the questions of our time. I spoke with them about their motivation to take up precisely that role, and the struggles that come with it. They offered me a glimpse into their inner worlds, searching for sentences and metaphors like entries in a diary. This dissertation shows how we are living in a time of shifts. We are tipping and tumbling towards a new order. Such change inevitably comes with friction, conflict, and even war.

I wanted to explore disruptive phenomena because I had a growing sense that the increasingly rapid pace of change in organisations, and beyond, was not something that could remain satisfactory indefinitely. I observed a series of tensions. The more we tried to show that everything was under control, the more contradictions surfaced. The more we sought to investigate and define key concepts, the further the answers drift away. And the more we focused on control, the less room there was for genuine curiosity and open exploration. This dissertation tells the story of that exploration, including the confusion, the uncertainty, and the continuous movement between questions and answers.

During this journey, more than anything, I came to feel that, in the words of Etty Hillesum, "we poor little human beings can do nothing but open our inner space and explore." That is what I wished to do with others.

I am pleased to share this journey, this story and this dissertation, with gratitude to all those who were so very "hospitable" to generously share their experiences. I hope this text offers moments of reflection, and perhaps even moments of resonance.

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1

# Chapter 1

Introduction “Always switched on”

"I am always switched on. I can't ease up." This quote is a remark from one of the public leaders in this study. "Always switched on" seems to capture the tension and struggles of present times. We frequently encounter expressions similar to these in our daily work in public organisations. Often mentioned in passing, such statements reveal underlying assumptions and the strain experienced by leaders[1].

These statements are typical for moments in which people experience pressure, especially in organisations. Moreover, it is not only in our work context that we are "always switched on." With this title, this thesis addresses our present sociological era, often described as VUCA, marked by "Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity" (Horney et al., 2010).

Accordingly, the Dutch Council for Public Health and Society (2025) in the Netherlands sounded the alarm. They stated, "we live in a 'hyper-anxious society' in which pressure to perform, acceleration, and individualism have gone too far and threaten the well-being of young and old alike" (Dutch Council for Public Health and Society, 2025).

This underlines the concern that this era will be remembered as a time of acceleration, characterised by working and living at a frantic pace, spurred by a persistent, solution-oriented mindset (Rosa, 2019). Public leaders are increasingly expressing a need for reflectivity, recognising it as a professional necessity, a personal need, and a natural human desire (Rhodes & Noordegraaf, 2007; Van der Wal, 2017). This indicates that they realise acceleration is not the answer to the dynamics of VUCA.

Alongside this, the uncertainties of this era appear to be fuelling "a growing desire for a strong leader" in many democratic countries. In this uncertain context, an increasing number of people choose a leader who claims to have clarity on cause and effect and promises to intervene with quick solutions (Van de Calseyde et al., 2021). In this matter, we observe a trend within the leadership debate that poses questions about current times and their implications for leadership.

The second often uttered phrase, "I can't ease up, I always have to give it my all," illustrates the tension public leaders experience to live up to a broad variety of appeals. In this light, a worldwide study by The Development Dimensions International (2025) indicates that 71% of leaders (operational, tactical, and strategic) experience stress levels while working in their position and role (DDI, 2025).

In summary, we initiated this study in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by a primary concern that "time to reflect and think" was under significant pressure for public strategic leaders and followers (Rosa, 2016; Raelin, 2002). We wondered: How do they approach these dynamics, and what is the meaning and value of reflectivity in current times?

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1 This study takes public strategic leaders, more precisely, public servants in leadership positions, as its main focus. In this text, we at times refer to this group as public leaders for the legibility of this dissertation. In the introduction of the dissertation and theory, and when general statements are applicable, we refer to 'leaders' in general terms.

## 1.1 Research aim, main question, and scope

The thesis of this study is that public strategic leaders in current times need to carve out time to think and reflect on their mindset and role, thereby creating meaning for themselves and others. The aim is to add perspectives to the leadership debate and provide insight into a) the present challenges faced by public strategic leaders and b) their experiences with reflective practices. Based on the thesis, the central question we explore in this study is: How do public strategic leaders experience and create reflectivity in current times, and what is the value of reflective practices in this context? The main findings on this central question are described in Chapter 6. The key concepts we chose were "reflectivity" and "leadership." The sub-questions in this study are:

- What does literature on reflectivity and leadership in current times reveal? – Chapter 2.
- How do public strategic leaders approach reflectivity in current times? – Chapter 3.
- What is revealed by comparing the core findings from the literature with the experiences of public strategic leaders in practice? – Chapter 4.
- What are the social and practical implications for public strategic leaders? – Chapter 5.

## 1.2 Key concepts and definitions

In this paragraph, we elaborate on the key concepts and related terms from the literature, concluding with the central concepts that form the foundation of this study. As a starting point, we present a summary of the key concept of reflectivity in Table 1, followed by an explanation. In general, the term "reflection" is derived from the Latin "reflectere", meaning "to bend back" (Webster, 2004). This etymological notion also underlies the natural scientific concept of reflection as the physical phenomenon of light or sound being reflected.

**Table 1**. Key concept reflectivity and related concepts

| Term | Described as … | Type |
|---|---|---|
| Reflectivity (including reflexivity) | An integrative ideational lens that combines introspective doubt/perplexity with relational-ethical attentiveness | Abstract ideological noun |
| Reflecting (including reflexing) | The act of engaging reflectively | Verb |
| Reflection(s) (including reflexion(s)) | The process, outcomes and effects of reflecting | Noun |
| Reflective practice (reflexive practice) | Concrete practices that create time/space for reflecting in context | Concrete practical noun |

### 1.2.1 Reflectivity and reflexivity

Concerning the demands leaders face in present times, the concept of reflectivity is addressed by a growing number of scholars. For example, Weber and Glynn (2006) argue that today's context generally requires a deeper attention structure for problems and questions. Kok and Van den Heuvel (2019) however state that leaders need to "create time to think, reflect, and discern, thereby creating meaning for themselves and others."

The concept of reflectivity is defined by Dewey (1933) as "doubt, hesitation or perplexity related to a directly experienced situation." He conceptualised reflectivity as a practice; an activity that is understood through its enactment rather than through abstraction, creating space to pause, step back, and make meaning of thoughts, events, and experiences (Dewey, 1933). For Dewey, reflectivity is integral to a cyclical process of learning and growth, in which action and reflectivity continuously inform one another, enhancing one's capacity to address problems, and navigate challenges.

Ricoeur (1991) contributes to the discourse on reflectivity by emphasising the hermeneutics of the self, elaborating on how individuals understand and interpret themselves. This primarily happens through language, narrative, and ethical responsibility. He argues that "individuals make sense of their lives by 'interpreting' and 'reinterpreting' their experiences" (Ricoeur, 1991). He positions practical wisdom (phronesis), the Aristotelian ability to navigate complex moral situations, as essential in contemporary society (Ricoeur, 1991). In summary, the concept of reflectivity refers mainly to ideological descriptions. In addition, Cunliffe (2009) extends this by framing the concept of "reflexivity" with an emphasis on a relational and ethical ideology requiring attentiveness to others and recognition that meaning is co-constructed. In this light, Hibbert et al. (2010) further suggest that reflexivity enables leaders to move beyond technical or purely rational responses, fostering more critical and collaborative problem-solving.

These elements all hold relevance; accordingly, we approach reflectivity and reflexivity as a single, integrated concept under the general term reflectivity. Reflectivity is thereby an umbrella to integrate both the introspective doubt, hesitation, and perplexity related to an experience, as well as the relational and ethical practices that require attentiveness to others. Reflexivity is treated as a constitutive element of reflectivity, rather than a separate construct.

### 1.2.2 Reflection(s)

For this study, we begin with Dewey's definition, which situates reflection under a broad umbrella and highlights the role of doubt and hesitation that emerge from lived experience in the process of reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933). Similarly, Arendt (2003) and Mattingly (2019) describe how moments of confusion and perplexity challenge our dominant frames, prompting new thinking and meaning-making. Arendt (2003) refers to the act of reflecting

and the effect of this act as opening space for new perspectives and moral action and as a foundation for a democratic society. In this light, various authors, such as Ghaye (2000), Finlay (2008), Kunneman and Suransky (2011), and Nullens (2019) argue that reflections create the space and time necessary to act with competence and integrity in morally complex or uncertain situations.

In this dissertation, we define reflectivity as the process of learning through and from experience. This includes doubt and perplexity as a source for reflections opening space for new perspectives, insights and moral action (Dewey, 1933; Arendt, 2003; Boud & Walker, 1998; Finlay, 2008). Above all, reflections in this dissertation are understood not as a process-outcome, or effect, but as a dialogical engagement shaped by relationships, narratives, and the subjectivities of all involved (Shotter, 2006).

### *1.2.3 Reflective practices*

Schön (1987) contributed to the concept of reflectivity by exploring how people can learn from their daily experiences through reflective practices. Concerning these practices, he introduced a distinction between "reflecting-on-action", "after-the-event thinking" and "reflecting-in-action", "thinking whilst doing" as the core act of reflectivity (Schön, 1987). Schön introduced the idea that reflective professionals are also capable of reflecting during action, allowing them to adapt and respond thoughtfully in the midst of practice (Schön, 1987). Schön's concept of reflectivity was originally about professionals and only indirectly applied to leadership.

Finlay (2008) emphasises that "reflective practice is not a single technique or step-by-step tool." She describes it as a "learning process" in which individuals critically examine their own actions, experiences, and assumptions (Finlay, 2008). She argues that this process occurs "in interaction with others" and "within a specific context," to gain insight and act more ethically and responsively (Finlay, 2008). In this light, Grint (2010) and Potter (2015) underline that "the context leaders generally face, require a new form of reflective practice". In this regard, Senge et al. (2005) emphasise that reflectivity is essential for leaders to co-initiate and co-shape innovations that address complex societal and organisational challenges (Senge et al., 2005). They consider reflectivity as an enabler for leaders to suspend habitual judgment and to access deeper sources of inspiration and knowing (Scharmer, 2016). Scharmer (2016) argues that without a disciplined practice of inner reflectivity, leaders risk perpetuating outdated structures and mental models that hinder transformative change. More specifically, in studies on organisational transitions, reflective practices are frequently identified as a crucial enabling factor, as they create space for questioning established assumptions and for reconfiguring prevailing interpretations and practices (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Weick, 1995). In this dissertation, we chose to use "reflective practices." As the central verb related to this concept, we use "reflecting."

### 1.2.4 Leadership

In this dissertation, we explore the general theory of leadership in current times, and, in addition, the specific demands for public strategic leaders. The general and specific findings will be referred to in this dissertation.

In the search for a definition of "leadership", Kilburg and Donohue (2011) offer a suitable perspective for the exploration of the experiences of public strategic leaders in current times. They describe leadership as a "complex emergent process, in which the leader(s), followers and stakeholders use their capabilities, thoughts, feelings, and behaviour to create mutually influencing relationships…" (Kilburg and Donohue, 2011).

This definition underlines the "emergent dynamics" in today's context, as well as the absence of clear universal criteria and principles, while also emphasising the essentials of leadership (Van Loon & Van Dijk, 2015). Firstly, this definition addresses that the "process of leadership", by definition, is related to leaders, followers, and stakeholders. In this light, Haslam et al. (2020) also underline this social psychological perspective on leadership, exploring the question of how leadership in general emerges. New to their contribution to leadership theory is the concept of leadership as a shared social identity, a sense of "us" that connects leaders and followers as a common group and that affects the reflective practices of leaders. Secondly, Kilburg and Donohue (2011) emphasise that leadership is an emerging process, creating co-evolving ways through "capabilities, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours." This refers to leadership in the process of experiencing, struggling, and reflecting. In this dissertation, we will elaborate on the specific characteristics of public strategic leadership with the use of these definitions as a starting point.

### 1.2.5 Current times: Adaptive challenges, wicked problems and an overload of information

Exploring these times, several scholars refer to the recent phenomena as VUCA (marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) or polycrisis (Horney et al., 2010; Bateson, 2023). To illustrate the meaning of today's context for public leaders, we first introduce three dominant concepts in the leadership debate as a starting point for this dissertation.

First, literature states that "the scale of change leaders are facing is remarkable and particularly visible when it comes to technology and communication" (Diamandis & Kotler, 2020). "Technology is bringing changes to global issues such as population growth, food supply and climate change, relying on advancements in artificial intelligence and biotechnology" (Diamandis & Kotler, 2020). These developments also introduce new paradoxes. For example, the fact that "more knowledge does not lead to more control, but to an increase in feelings of uncertainty" (Obolensky, 2014). Van Loon and Van Dijk (2015) describe the most significant leadership challenges as "being able to cope with complexity,

global interconnectedness and continuous change." Heifetz (1994), Marion and Uhl-Bien (2011) refer to these challenges as "adaptive challenges," problems too complex to be easily resolved, requiring reflectivity, social engagement, and support to explore the issues with an open mind, rather than quickly analysing and solving.

Secondly, Marion and Uhl-Bien (2011) emphasise that leaders generally cope with an increase in "wicked issues", referring to "complex and novel problems that have not been experienced by others before", meaning that no prior knowledge is available (Grint, 2005). Examples include societal issues in complex fields involving multiple stakeholders, such as the CO2 and nitrogen issues, refugee reception, loneliness in urban areas, high school dropouts, and the rise in obesity. At a macro-level, the challenge is how to approach social or societal problems in a complex force field with stakeholders. At the micro-level, the challenges lie in everyday decisions, e.g., how to intervene in these force fields. The increase in wicked issues brings new sources of stress. For example by the paradox that "within the wicked issues, all decisions, and actions bring new uncertainties" (Bauman, 2000).

In addition to these adaptive challenges and wicked issues, the literature contends that leaders are overwhelmed by incoming information and impulses characteristic of the digital age (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008). A growing number of leaders experience an accelerating force and feel as though they have "no time to think" (Raelin, 2002). "Doing swallows up reflectivity and learning" (Amulya, 2004; Raelin, 2002). This concern resonates with, for example, Rosa's work on acceleration. Rosa (2016, 2019) states that "the acceleration in communication" and the "possibilities afforded by technology" are sources of stress, burnout, and depression[2].

Leaders, and specifically public strategic leaders, are thereby confronted with another paradoxical pattern. Despite having more time due to technological advancements, they experience "shrinking time", characterised by the desire to accomplish more in less time (Rosa, 2016). In this dissertation, we will refer to current times in general terms. In the different research steps, we explore what is most relevant in contemporary times for the practices of public strategic leaders.

2 Rosa points out the "neoliberal" and "capitalistic" mindset in Western societies as the root cause. From his perspective, neoliberalism is not only a set of economic policies, but a normative "social order." The world is approached as something to be mastered, measured and utilized, rather than encountered as meaningful or responsive (Rosa, 2019). Next to that, he argues that "capitalism" should be understood not merely as an economic system, but as an "existential mode of world-relation" that reduces it to an object of optimization. He states that capitalism provides the systemic drive for acceleration, while neoliberalism supplies the normative and institutional framework through which this drive is enforced and internalized. The consequence is a sense of alienation, burnout, and loss of meaning (Rosa, 2019).

## 1.3 Research design and methodology

The aim of this dissertation is to add perspectives to the existing literature on reflectivity and leadership, to help provide insight into the present challenges faced by public strategic leaders and their experiences with reflectivity. Hence, this study must be characterised as an applied and contextual study. Because of the largely ideological and fragmented theories on this subject, an empirical exploration was necessary to achieve an understanding of public strategic leaders' actual experiences. Employing a predominantly exploratory and qualitative approach is most fitting due to the personal and contextual nature of the topics.

### *1.3.1 The scope of this dissertation*

The scope of this dissertation is to investigate the experiences of public strategic leaders in the Netherlands. The context of the Netherlands is interesting to study due to its democratic landscape, combined with a growing call for "strong" leadership in current times. The Dutch consensus-based "polder model," involving employers, unions, and the government, offers a specific context to explore today's context. Considering the definition of leadership we chose in this study; we primarily focus on public strategic leaders who are daily involved in both stakeholder and people-management responsibilities. We chose this group because of the volatile and uncertain dynamics in their political and organisational context, as well as the complex and ambiguous demands inherent in their position in current times.

### *1.3.2 Researcher position and ontology*

Within this framework, we explored reflectivity in practices, while adopting an interpretive methodology that views knowledge as "co-constructed" between the researcher and participants (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Cunliffe et al., 2004). As mentioned, reflectivity in this dissertation is understood not as a neutral, objective process, but as a dialogical engagement shaped by relationships, narratives, and the subjectivities of all involved (Shotter, 2006). The constructivist ontology of this study is grounded in the belief that reality is not fixed but shaped by people's experiences and social interactions (Ricoeur, 1992). In this study, we approach knowledge as something arising from the interpretation and re-interpretation of those experiences (Ricoeur, 1992). We used a qualitative, exploratory approach to remain open to the topic's complexity. Specifically, we focus on understanding and unpacking the personal stories of public strategic leaders to discover how they make sense of their experiences. The research follows an inductive epistemology and employs an exploratory design in response to the contextual character of the subject matter (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Van Ooijen, 2023).

### 1.3.3 Literature review (Chapter 2):

Starting with the concern that research, particularly on leadership (in general), has accelerated at a tremendous speed, thereby remaining fragmented and interdisciplinary (Snyder, 2019). To address this concern, we conducted a semi-systematic review analysis of the literature on leadership and reflectivity. To gain insight into the existing body of knowledge on public strategic leadership and reflectivity in current times, we first explored the underlying themes and assumptions. We explored various perspectives, focusing on the key concepts. We started with a semi-structured thematic analysis, utilising searches in WorldCat and Google Scholar. The data collection was followed by a qualitative analysis and meta-reflections, which identified several patterns in the literature and a theoretical conceptualisation. The findings of this review identified themes that warrant further qualitative investigation, specifically in the actual practices of leaders.

### 1.3.4 Phenomenological exploration (Chapter 3):

In the literature review, we identified a growing need for more qualitative empirical insights on leaders' daily struggles and reflective practices, particularly in today's context. Therefore, in this step, the aim was to unpack the "lived experiences" of public strategic leaders to gain insight into their experiences (Van Manen, 2017). The overarching purpose was to collect "thick data" on the beliefs and practices of public strategic leaders, aiming to penetrate beneath the surface manifestations of leaders in practice (Arthur et al., 2004; Rhodes & Noordegraaf, 2007; Van Manen, 2017). We opted for an exploration from a "with-ness perspective" to gain further insights into the daily experiences of public strategic leaders in practice, rather than the often-theoretical debate about how leaders must behave as described in the "aboutness perspective" (Shotter, 2006). We selected public strategic leaders based on their engagement in complex contexts with an active reflective practice, e.g., in the Reflective Chamber[3], and their capacity to express these meanings through dialogue. In the samples in this first phase, we selected thirteen participants working in various public organisations, including health, government, education, government infrastructure, and social organisations.

### 1.3.5 Narrative exploration (Chapter 4):

To deepen the insights and outcomes of the literature-review and phenomenological study, we specifically explored the meaning public strategic leaders attribute to reflectivity with an additional narrative exploration. In this additional research step, we compared three dominant narratives in literature with the dominant narratives of public strategic leaders in

3 Most of the participants took part in the Reflective Chamber, a reflective place for public leaders to exchange and deepen their reflections as a person and as a public leader, organised by the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht. Three of the participants took part in a reflective program with a processual approach (De Opleiding tot Proceskundige, Wenders, Haarlem).

practice by exploring the paradigms derived from qualitative surveys and group dialogues. We conducted research with twelve new participants using open surveys and a focus group. The outcomes of the phenomenological exploration suggested a specific focus on the interpersonal reflective practices of the public strategic leaders.

### *1.3.6 Normative exploration (Chapter 5):*

In the last step, the aim was to examine the ethical and social implications of the results of the literature-review, phenomenological-, and narrative studies. In this phase, the focus shifted from an open inquiry to an exploration of the findings from a normative humanistic stance.

In this chapter, we present a conceptual framework as a starting point to explore the pressures on reflectivity. We explore these pressures in the context of several sociological shifts. Mirroring the narratives with this conceptual framework in an extra focus group of six additional new participants, a series of concrete pressures and related critical moments appeared for reflectivity in practice with significant ethical and social implications. Based on the earlier findings in the phenomenological- and narrative studies, the aim was to explore the pressures within "spontaneous interpersonal" reflective practices of the participants.

Table 2 summarises the selected samples and methods as mentioned across the three phases of this study.

**Table 2**. Samples and methods across three phases

| **Phase** | **Sample** | **Methods** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Phenomenological | 13 participants | In-depth interviews and observations |
| 2. Narrative | 12 participants | Group dialogue and open survey |
| 3. Normative–Humanistic | 6 participants | Group dialogue and observations |
| *Totals* | *Gender* | *Source* |
| *31 participants* | *12 women, 19 men* | *New contacts: 29, Known contacts: 2* |

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2

# Chapter 2

## Literature review; Leadership reflective practices: Adaptive challenges, slow questions, and meaningful relations

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## Chapter summary

In recent times characterised by volatility and acceleration, leaders in organisations at a strategic level are facing increasingly complex adaptive challenges accompanied by a growing body of information, as for example with the COVID-19 pandemic, climate, and AI.[4] They are increasingly challenged by an uncontrollable dynamic. This chapter explores the role of reflective practices in the context of these challenges. The background of the study is the observation that, likewise, business research has accelerated at a tremendous speed, thereby remaining fragmented and interdisciplinary. Therefore, this study analyses the literature on leadership and reflectivity in current times. The aim is to investigate the key concepts and to create an agenda for further research. This review demonstrates that addressing slow questions and creating meaningful relations could play a critical role for leaders experiencing adaptive challenges and shrinking time. The meta-reflections in this chapter reveal two dimensions of reflective practices relevant for future investigation: firstly, intrapersonal, intuitive, and embodied reflectivity on leaders' experiences; and secondly, dialogical sense-making with others. This chapter shows that reflective practices have primarily been studied among professionals, rather than among leaders. This raises the question: Is the general assumption that professionals reflect and that leaders mainly act?

4 This literature-review is conducted during the COVID-19- pandemic and published in 2021.

## 2.1 Introduction

This semi-systematic review analyses the content of literature on leadership and reflectivity in current volatile times. The background of the study is the observation that business research has also accelerated at a tremendous speed, thereby remaining fragmented and interdisciplinary (Snyder, 2019). To gain insight into the body of knowledge on leadership and reflectivity in today's context, we first elaborate on the problem statement and aim of this study.

### *2.1.1 Problem statement and aim of this chapter*

In contemporary times, technology brings significant changes to global issues such as climate change, population growth, food supply, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology (Diamandis & Kotler, 2020). These developments enable huge advances and bring new complexities and paradoxes, such as the paradox that more knowledge does not lead to more control, but to an increase in feelings of uncertainty (Obolensky, 2014).

The issues leaders experience as a result of this complexity reveal the challenges they face at this specific time, and how they seek to identify and grasp these changes (Van Dijk, 2016). In a recent study of 13,124 organisation leaders, Bennett and Lemoine (2014) found that complexity is the greatest challenge leaders are currently facing. Their research also showed that 18% of leaders feel capable of leading in this context, as cited in Rimita (2019). According to Obolensky (2014), leaders have been facing an increase in ambiguous situations and new questions about a fundamental new perspective on leadership. Van Loon and Van Dijk (2015) described the greatest leadership challenges as "being able to cope with complexity, global interconnectedness and continuous change." Within leadership theory, Marion and Uhl-Bien (2011) called these challenges "adaptive challenges." They defined these challenges as too complex to resolve and requiring social engagement and support.

In this chapter, we focus on leaders dealing with adaptive challenges. At the macro-level, the challenge is how to approach social or societal problems in a complex field of stakeholders. At the micro-level, the challenges lie in everyday decisions and how to intervene in complex processes. Next to these adaptive challenges, literature illustrates how leaders are overloaded with an increasingly demanding information flow (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008). A growing number of leaders experience an accelerating force. They experience "no time to think" in the dynamics of their daily work (Raelin, 2002). Leaders are, in their mindset, primarily described as conditioned to act and to decide instead of "to reflect" or "to learn" (Raelin, 2002, Amulya, 2004).

Rosa (2010, 2016, 2019) stated that the acceleration in communication and the possibilities due to technology today are the sources of stress, burnout, and depression. Leaders are thereby confronted with another paradoxical pattern, namely that despite having more time because of technological inventions, they experience "shrinking time", wanting to do more in less time (Rosa, 2010, 2016, 2019). Like Kegan (1994), Rosa emphasised that the mental demands on leaders have increased in this era. Rosa specified the problem, explaining that leaders are unable to form a meaningful relationship with this "uncontrollable" world. He described this as a form of alienation.

The main concern of this review is to explore literature on the issue of time to reflect and think in the context of leadership in an accelerating and increasingly digital era (Van Dijk & Van Loon, 2015). Kunneman and Suransky (2011) pointed at the urgency for leaders to address slow questions because of the moral dilemmas and the existential issues involved, concerning adaptive challenges at the strategic level. These questions are called "slow" because they cannot be adequately addressed with fast technical remedies, as they leave out the existential and moral issues, as well as stakeholders' mutual vulnerability and dependency (Kunneman & Suransky, 2011). In this chapter, the aim is to explore literature to develop an agenda for further research. The study dives into the growing importance of reflective time and space to address slow questions and to create meaningful relationships between leaders with the world, the issues at hand, and others, such as followers and stakeholders. The focus of the study and the observations made during the COVID-19 pandemic underline the alienating effect of digital and uncontrollable dynamics. In this chapter, we will illustrate the gaps in the existing literature and the urgency of new perspectives to the leadership debate, to help leaders reconsider their assumptions about their roles, mindsets, and attention structures.

## 2.2 Literature review on key concepts

The review of the literature is organised in a first section on the key concept of complexity and adaptive challenges for leaders. The second section elaborates on accelerated times, reflective practice and resonance. The body of the review shares two dimensions found in literature on reflective practices as a basis for an agenda for the discussion and conclusions for further research.

### *2.2.1 Complexity and adaptive challenges for leaders*

To elaborate on leaders' changing context, we start with Bauman (2000, 2007), according to whom we are facing global developments in Western societies, in that people are being confronted with uncertainty. He described "liquid modernity" as contrasted with the "solid modernity" that preceded it. According to Bauman, the passage from "solid to liquid"

modernity created a new and unprecedented setting for individual life pursuits, confronting individuals with a series of never-before-encountered challenges (Bauman 2000).[5]

He pointed out the significant changes over the past century as "five departures" simultaneously at work. Firstly, institutions and social forms like the church and other communities are decomposing. Secondly, "power and politics are divorcing", as power is held by global business interests that political organisations are unable to regulate themselves. Thirdly, "social safety nets are dissolving" at the same time as monopolies are being deregulated. Fourth, long-term planning and thinking about the shape of communities and social patterns have ceded to "quick fixes and quick profits." And lastly, the economic and political risks generated by global power are shifting the burden of volatile markets onto individuals' shoulders. He described this tendency towards fluidity as being full of fear. In practice, leaders are on a daily basis confronted with paradoxical forces Bauman (2000) addressed, in which they experience all actions as bringing new uncertainties.

During the same period as Bauman's publications (2000), the US Army War College developed the term "VUCA", which stands for "Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous." The concept gained prominence in military thinking as a way of describing a world characterised by geopolitical instability, rapid technological change, globalisation, and emerging security threats, including terrorism (Horney et al., 2010).

Volatility stands for the speed, magnitude, and dynamics of change, while uncertainty describes the unpredictability of issues and events (Horney et al., 2010). Complexity stands for the chaos that surrounds all organisations, and ambiguity refers to the "haziness of reality and the mixed meanings of conditions" (Horney et al., 2010; Kornelsen, 2019). The 21st century marked the beginning of NextGen warfare, such as 9/11 and the Syrian war, where globalisation and technology fuelled a new kind of conflict (Fry, 2016). It marked a new era of change in which armies have to cope with unknown enemies with unknown tactics (Horney et al., 2010).

As a result of similar disturbing changes as experienced in the US Army, VUCA entered the business lexicon in the early 2000s (Stiehm and Townsend, 2002). Stiehm and Townsend (2002) observed a new turbulent dynamic in organisations. Bennett and Lemoine (2014) illustrated how these dynamics caused uncertainty and mental anguish among leaders. Both the concept of VUCA and Bauman's analysis raise the question: What does this perspective mean for leaders?

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5 Bauman (2000) argues that late-modern capitalism has shifted from a "solid" to a "liquid" form, in which social structures, institutions and life trajectories lose their durability and binding force. Neoliberalism functions as the cultural and normative framework that legitimises this condition by individualising responsibility and risk. He observes a transformation of citizenship into consumption, whereby social value is measured in terms of marketability, attractiveness, and employability.

It shows that a new "organisational logic" is appearing due to the "knowledge- and innovation-driven economies", since economic value is created by creative processes with clients, in networks, in temporary, informal partnerships (Van Dijk, 2016). This knowledge- and innovation-driven economy has a "complex logic, as cause and effect are not clearly delineated due to their interconnectedness"; the boundary between organisations and their environment is becoming increasingly permeable (Van Dijk, 2016). Marion and Uhl-Bien (2011) stated that despite the needs of the current knowledge era, much of leadership theory has remained largely grounded in a bureaucratic framework, as also noted by Gronn (2000). They also introduced the concept of "complexity leadership" to describe the changing environment that requires a new mindset (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2011). They distinguished three roles to categorise various activities and paradigms that leaders encounter: a) leadership grounded in traditional, bureaucratic notions of hierarchy, alignment, and control; b) leadership that structures and enables conditions to optimally enable creative problem-solving, adaptability, and learning; and c) leadership as a generative dynamic that underlies emergent change activities (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2011).

Complexity has been relevant in the past century, but what is different for leaders in the 21st century? Jakubik and Berazhny (2017) argue that, particularly, the digital character of these times reinforces the need for a new leadership model. They plead for an approach in which the leader is not positioned in the centre of power and communication (Jakubik & Berazhny, 2017). Jakubik and Berazhny (2017) state that leaders who adapt to the digital era are aware that they cannot succeed alone and must rely on collaboration and teamwork. In their eyes, leaders create and enable high-performing teams and communities, stay in constant connection with stakeholders, and utilise technological opportunities (Jakubik & Berazhny, 2017).

Considering all this, Kilburg and Donohue (2011) searched for an integrative definition of leadership in present times, describing it as, "an emergent process, in which the leader(s), follower(s) and other stakeholders, formal and informal, in a human enterprise use their characteristics, capabilities, thoughts, feelings, and behaviour to create mutually influencing relationships…"

This definition encompasses the complexity of the context and the lack of clear universal guidelines and principles, while also emphasising the essentials of leadership (Kilburg and Donohue, 2011; Van Loon & Van Dijk, 2015). Firstly, this definition addresses that the process of leadership, by definition, is related to leaders, followers, and stakeholders (Kilburg and Donohue, 2011). In this light, Haslam et al. (2020) offer a social psychological perspective on leadership, exploring how leadership emerges. New in their contribution to leadership theory is the concept of leadership as a shared social identity, a sense of "us" that connects leaders and followers as a common group and affects the reflective practices of leaders. Secondly, Kilburg and Donohue (2011) underscore that leadership

is an "emerging process," creating "co-evolving" ways using characteristics, capabilities, thoughts, feelings, and behaviour that refer to leadership in the process of experiencing and struggling.

### *2.2.2 Accelerating times: Leadership and reflective time and space*

A main theme in this chapter is the growing number of leaders experiencing an accelerating force and a dominant expectation to act rather than think, leaving them with little time to reflect (Rosa, 2016). In this light, Rosa (2010, 2016, 2019) argues that we are confronted with a "shrinking of time" which consists of three types of "accelerating forces": firstly, the technical acceleration that makes it possible to move at a faster pace; secondly, the acceleration of changes in society, which encompasses family structures and professional orientations; and thirdly, the acceleration of the speed of life (Rosa, 2019). Neither of the first two areas significantly changed over many generations, but now they are changing within one lifetime (Rosa, 2019). Now, people are striving to achieve more and see time as an economic asset. According to Rosa (2010, 2016, 2019), the current problems stem from the phenomenon that people are unable to form meaningful relationships of mutual understanding and interaction, neither with their material surroundings nor with their fellow human beings (Rosa, 2019). At the root of this disability, he pinpoints the constant striving for modernistic control and predictability (Lijster et al., 2019). In response, he introduces the concept of "resonance" (Rosa, 2016, 2019). He defined resonance as "a form of world-relation, in which subject and world meet and transform each other" (Rosa, 2019). He pleaded for resonance, offering a basis for experiencing a slower, deeper, meaningful, dynamic, and transformative rapport between, in this case, leaders and their environment (Rosa, 2019).

Raelin (2002) expressed the concern that leaders experience "no time to think." He illustrates how leaders are socialised to be "people of action", not of reflectivity; action is required and thereby doing as a short-term solution overrules reflecting and learning over the long term (Raelin, 2002). Delaying decisions is seen as a sign of weakness, and leaders look for answers rather than questions (Raelin, 2002).

The concept of reflective practices they refer to is best understood as "the process of learning" through and from experience towards gaining new insights (Boud et al. 1998, 1985, in Finlay, 2008). Cattaneo and Motta (2020) contributed to this by exploring how people can learn from their experience. They investigated two types of reflectivity in practice, building on Schön (1987): "reflection-on-action as after-the-event thinking" and "reflection-in-action, thinking while doing" and found an effect of explicit reflectivity followed by an increase in "meta-cognitive prompts" to reflect on their practice (Cattaneo and Motta, 2020).

Earlier, the relevance of addressing slow questions, because of the "moral dilemmas and the existential issues" involved, was underlined (Kunneman & Suransky, 2011). In this light, Kahneman (2012) described two systems in our thinking using different processes within the mind. System 1, he described as "fast thinking: automatic, unconscious, and with minimal effort" (Kahneman, 2012). This comes across as passive thinking because it happens beyond one's control; reacting, feeling and sensing. He referred to System 2 as "slow thinking": deliberate, conscious, and with obvious effort (Kahneman, 2012). Because this conscious way of thinking keeps the person in control, it points out a more intelligent way of thinking. He argued that "complex issues require System 1 to recognise patterns" and "System 2 to explain these patterns to others" (Kahneman, 2012). Therefore, ambiguous and fluid challenges need both systems. Considering this, Tsang (2008) put forward the concepts of time, stating that if the right action must be taken in the right place in volatile processes, one should also consider the right time, the dimension of "Kairos" (Tsang, 2008). He aimed to point out the notion of "reflection-in-action" as not only figuring out what is the best thing to do, but above all, at which moment in time (Tsang, 2008).

## 2.3 Reflective practices further explored

The following question arises: What is written about leadership and reflective practices in literature? First, it is striking that the combination of leadership and reflective practice is rarely explored in empirical research, particularly in studies grounded in actual experiences.

Furthermore, examining the diverse studies in a meta-reflection, two dimensions of reflective practices emerged, which, in our view, are growing in relevance for research among leaders in current times. The first dimension is the "individual, intrapersonal, intuitive, and spiritual practices"; and the second is the "interpersonal, dialogical sense-making practices."

**Table 1**. Two dimensions of reflective practices in literature

| **Adaptive challenges and accelerated shrinking time** | **Literature on reflective practices: Individually** |
|---|---|
| Fluidity, volatility, and acceleration; emerging processes. | Intrapersonal |
| Leadership in the process: Addressing slow questions; creating meaningful relations from within concerning the issues. | Intuitive and spiritual practices; fast and slow thinking.<br><br>Focusing on emotional and spiritual and physical intelligence, embodied- experiences and processual presence. |
| **Adaptive challenges, wicked issues, and accelerated shrinking time** | **Literature on reflective practices: Creating meaning with others** |
| Volatility, Uncertainty, Ambiguity, and Complexity; co-evolving processes. | Interpersonal. |
| Leadership as process: Addressing slow questions; creating meaningful relations with others concerning the issues. | Dialogical, moral, sense-making practices. Focusing on mental intelligence, constructs, metaphors, and new meaning in a process of co-authoring. |

### *2.3.1 Intrapersonal: Intuitive & spiritual practices, practical wisdom, and embodiment*

Considering the fluidity, volatility, and acceleration of emerging processes, various scholars have sought alternative models of intelligence, besides leaders' cognitive intelligence. In this first reflective dimension, leaders' inner experiences are a subject of reflectivity to address the adaptive challenges or "slow" questions in relation to the accelerated dynamics and the ambiguity of the issues.

Firstly, Küpers and Statler (2008) pointed out the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom, in Greek, phronesis (Küpers & Statler, 2008). This concept focuses on the question of how leaders deal ethically and effectively with fluidity (Küpers & Statler, 2008). For Aristotle, the key distinction between practical wisdom and knowledge was that practical wisdom involved experiential encounters and experience with lived situations (Küpers & Statler, 2008). Practical knowledge and practical wisdom are hereby put above intellectual scientific and rational knowledge (Van Manen, 1990).

Within this view, Goleman (2012) introduced the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) (Goleman, 2012). He defined EI as "the ability to motivate oneself, persistence, impulse control, mood regulation, empathy, and hope" (Goleman, 2012). In addition, the concept of spiritual intelligence (SI) arose at the beginning of the 21st century (Nullens, 2019). Covey (2014) described the broad spectrum with four intelligences: physical intelligence (PI), mental intelligence (MI), EI, and SI, as relevant for leaders in the current, fluid times.

SI is defined as people's drive for meaning and connection with the infinite (Nullens, 2019). It points to their personal ability to create, based on deep understanding of existential questions, with the awareness of multiple levels of consciousness (Vaughan 2002).

Both Covey and Nullens argue that SI is the central and most fundamental of all the intelligences because it becomes the source of guidance for the others (Covey 2014, p. 53). Covey emphasised that leaders should not only focus on how to act, but above all, "why" they act in a certain way (Covey 2014).

Küpers and Statler (2008) added to this, describing the body as the mediating link between internal and external experience, and between meaning and action. They emphasised that wisdom is not only realised through experiential processes, but that embodied and emotional experiences are always involved when practical wisdom emerges (Küpers & Statler, 2008). Wisdom is not only influenced by what leaders and followers think, but mainly by what they feel and live through (Küpers & Statler, 2008). They followed Merleau-Ponty (1962) and his phenomenological perspective, stating that all those involved in their lifeworld are first and foremost embodied beings.

In summary, these sources in literature offer possibilities for leaders to create new meaning in a fluid and accelerating context, reflecting by way of intuitive and spiritual practices. This approach underlines leadership in process, acknowledging the experiences leaders face. A point of critique is that this dimension neglects leaders' interpersonal interactions with others.

### *2.3.2 Interpersonal: Dialogical- sense-making practices; creating meaning with others*

The second reflective dimension in literature focuses on leadership as an interactive process, addressing the uncertainties when facing adaptive challenges. Rosa (2010, 2016, 2019) described this dimension as creating meaningful relationships of mutual understanding and interaction, in this case with fellow human beings, "in which subject and world meet and transform each other."

Frimann and Hersted (2016) pleaded for the construction of meaning in uncertain, ambiguous situations. In their view, meaning evolves when leaders involve employees, fellow leaders, and other stakeholders in their reflections and decision-making processes. According to this vision, leadership can be seen "as a social construction of meaning between parties to organisational processes" (Frimann and Hersted, 2016). Gergen (1999) articulated an impactful view on this, stating that the creation of meaningful language requires social coordination:

> *"There is nothing we call language that is born within the private mind. Until there is mutual agreement on the meaningful character of words or actions, they fail to constitute language. If this line of argument is carried to its conclusion, we find that it is not the mind of the single individual that provides the sense of certitude, but the process of communal relationship"* (Gergen, 1999, p. 221).

He illustrated how, in a world in which globalisation brings opposing realities into increasingly sharp conflict, new resources for communication become essential (Gergen, 1999). The first resource is "self-reflexivity." He described self-reflexivity as beyond the ego. One questions one's position and the plurality of meanings (Gergen, 1999). The second resource is dialogue with another in which the parties reflect on conflicting meanings (Gergen, 1999). The final resource is self-expression by way of storytelling (Gergen, 1999). He pointed out that all three resources call for a curious mindset and demand one to listen to others rather than disputing or blaming (Gergen, 1999). In this regard, Frimann and Hersted (2016) suggest that leadership-authoring, must be seen as a "participatory narrative process of co-authoring."

In summary, this reflective dimension opens possibilities to create new meaning in an uncertain and volatile context, underlining leadership as an interactive process and acknowledging the polyphony that leaders must navigate in their everyday practice. One point of critique is that this dimension neglects leaders' presence and their personal abilities to reflect and discern.

## 2.4 Methodology

Since this review focuses on a topic that is differently conceptualised and studied by various groups of researchers in various different contexts, we opted for a semi-systematic review focussing on the exploration of the key concepts (Snyder, 2019). This method made it possible to detect new themes and conduct a meta-reflection. According to Snyder, business research has a fragmented character, making it difficult to define an explicit state-of-the-art. In our view, the subject of leadership and reflectivity in current accelerated times is specifically subject to this fragmentation. Therefore, we started with a structured thematic analysis of the search in WorldCat and Google Scholar using the following keywords: "fluid times," "VUCA," "leadership," "complexity," and "reflective practice."

Based on these keywords, a selection was investigated concerning a) the most influential sources, b) empirical studies, c) the most recent publications of the 21st century and d) the fundamental works of the past century. We analysed more than 100 sources in total for their concepts, methods, and outcomes. This was followed by a qualitative analysis and meta-reflection, identifying several patterns and a theoretical conceptualisation (Ward et al., 2009). This resulted in the two dimensions of reflective practice that offer a meta-reflection on the subject and a basis for further research.

## 2.5 Discussion and conclusion

We started with the concern that more attention is needed for the specific dynamics and characteristics of present times for leaders and their reflective practices. The starting point of this review is that time to reflect and think is vital in the context of leadership, both for leaders and for followers. The aim of the study is to add perspectives to the leadership-debate and to reconsider leaders' assumptions about their roles, mindsets, and attention structures. In this chapter, we wanted to point out a few underlying assumptions and emerging themes. One assumption in the literature is that reflective practices are equivalent to slowing down and taking time. This would be a theme to further explore. Is this assumption about reflective practices an obstacle for leaders to integrate into their practices? Do leaders consider reflectivity as an extra time-consuming task?

In general, there is a wide range of assumptions on the nature of reflective practices. Several authors have approached reflective time as "recovery time", using words such as "come to one's senses" and "become whole" (among others Kok and Van den Heuvel, 2019). Other authors have approached reflective practices using phrases such as "time to think instead of doing," "learning instead of working," or "spiritual instead of analytical" (among others Schön, 1987, Finlay, 2008).

These approaches unfold an ideology about how leaders face adaptive challenges in accelerating times, as reflected in terms such as, e.g., "transcending," "embodied," "conscious," "practically wise," "spiritually intelligent," "co-authoring," and "dialogical." From another angle, these ideologies could also be seen as fields of tension leaders have to deal with in today's context, hence highlighting relevant themes for further investigation.

Throughout the existing literature such tensions are revealed in dichotomies like "doing versus thinking," "rationality versus emotionality," "analytic versus intuitive," "controllable versus uncontrollable," "alienated versus resonant," "forward driven versus reflective," "fast versus slow thinking," and "individual versus collective." All these tensions appear to be relevant and should be considered for future work.

The conclusion of this review is that the "complexity" of present times and "accelerating forces" are underlined in various studies on leadership (among others Horney et al. 2010; Jakubik & Berazhny, 2017; Rosa, 2019).

The literature review leads to the hypothesis that more attention is needed for leaders' reflective practices faced with adaptive challenges.

This review also shows that reflective practices have primarily been studied among teachers, nurses, social workers, and other professionals. In contrast, studies on leaders are mostly descriptive and prescriptive, addressing an ideology of how to be a good leader.

This raises the question: Is the general assumption that professionals think and that leaders mainly act? Regardless, considering present times, this gap asks for further research.

In general, we found a growing concern that more empirical evidence must be gathered on leaders' daily struggles and reflective practices, especially given the fact that the current context remains subject to accelerating transformation due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. For example, since 2020, the centres of sense-making have increasingly been technology-based. Leaders around the world interact increasingly through digitally mediated environments. Haraway (1996) introduced in this light the term 'cyborg beings'; constantly in communication with technology. The aim of these empirical studies must be to provide insights into leaders' reflective practices; in their struggles and needs, developing new practical approaches that have positive impacts on their roles, mindsets, and attention structures. A better understanding of these experiences will also enrich organisational coaching and counselling, emphasising slow questions and the importance of cultivating meaningful relationships with the world and others.

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3

# Chapter 3

## Phenomenological exploration; Public strategic leaders in accelerated times: A qualitative study on their reflective practices

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## Chapter summary

The purpose of this chapter is to phenomenologically explore the reflective practices of leaders in public organisations in a complex societal context in combination with rapid change. In this chapter, we specifically explore the lived experiences of public strategic leaders to generate new hypotheses concerning their reflective practices. The phenomenological methodology consists of analysing the lived experiences of thirteen participants, collected in in-depth interviews. The thick data offer new and up-to-date insights into the daily experiences of public strategic leaders concerning their challenges, the effects of the accelerated work dynamic and what Rosa (2019) would describe as alienating forces, their reflex to withdraw when facing emotional incidents and the effects of their contradictory mindsets. A practical implication is the need for a critical approach towards reflective practices of public strategic leaders. The risk is that reflectivity is approached as a socially desirable instrumental ritual. Considering the needs and desires the public strategic leaders expressed, we wondered: Is there a growing importance of reflective time and space or, above all, meaningful relations and resonant moments in the context of 'alienating' forces? The phenomenological exploration offers concrete insights into the daily experience of public strategic leaders, as opposed to the often-abstract theory. The new hypotheses provide a new starting point for further critical phenomenological research.

## 3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the reflective practices of leaders in public organisations in a complex societal context and rapid change phenomenologically. In this chapter, we specifically explore the lived experiences of public strategic leaders to generate new hypotheses concerning their reflective practices. We chose this group because of its strategic role in current fluid and ambiguous times as described by various scholars (Bauman, 2000, 2007; Rhodes & Noordegraaf, 2007; Horney et al., 2010; Rosa, 2019; Van der Wal, 2017). The study is motivated by the observation that business and management research has itself undergone tremendous acceleration, resulting in a "fragmented and persistently interdisciplinary landscape" (Snyder, 2019).

In the choice for this qualitative approach, we follow Rhodes and Noordegraaf (2007), who highlighted the value of qualitative explorations to study public leaders. They state that political science provides limited help in developing our understanding of the behaviour of top-level bureaucrats and why they do what they do (Rhodes & Noordegraaf, 2007).

Similarly to this, Arthur et al. (2004) suggest that the "blind spot" in understanding leadership is the lack of attention to understanding experiences; moreover, they state that developing a method for accessing experience is of utmost importance for understanding leadership. This view asks for qualitative research, collecting thick data on the beliefs and practices to penetrate beneath the surface manifestations (Arthur et al., 2004; Rhodes & Noordegraaf, 2007).

Consequently, the overarching purpose of this chapter is to use a phenomenological approach to better understand the experiences that facilitate leadership reflectivity and, thereby, leadership development.

In this regard, Vaill (1996) underlined the urgency of learning, considering the dynamics of "permanent white water": the unpredictable environment in which leaders work. He explained how "non-stop white water" places leaders in situations requiring actions they have little experience with or have never done before, thus making effective learning a critical skill (Vaill, 1996). Noordegraaf (2007) emphasises the increase in visibility and expectations of public strategic leaders due to economic, social, and technological transformations. In their context, public strategic leaders face a series of "critical demands" due to increased stakeholder multiplicity, authority turbulence, innovation forces, and ethical complexities (Van der Wal, 2017).

Horney et al. (2010) and Kornelsen et al. (2019) refer to the term VUCA to describe the volatility, speed, magnitude, and dynamics of change, and uncertainty to describe the unpredictability of issues and events in public management. In their definition, complexity stands for the chaos that surrounds all organisations, and ambiguity describes the "haziness of reality and the mixed meanings of conditions" (Horney et al., 2010); Kornelsen, 2019).

In general, leaders face an increase in ambiguous situations and new questions, calling for a fundamentally new perspective on leadership (Noordegraaf, 2007; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2011; Obolensky, 2014). Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced the concept of "wicked issues," as opposed to "tame issues," referring to complex and new societal problems that have not previously been experienced, which means that no prior knowledge is available. Heifetz (1994) refers to problems that are too complex to be quickly resolved, and which require social engagement and support. They distinguish between adaptive and technical problems (Heifetz, 1994).

Adaptive problems are defined as challenges faced by leaders that require a new form of reflective practice (Heifetz, 1994; Grint, 2010). Adaptive problems address the same dynamic as wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Conklin, 2001; Grint, 2005; Van Mourik, 2022). In this chapter, we define the context and problems as complex.[6]

Relevant to this chapter is the point that new demands on leaders call for a more profound "attention structure" in response to the questions arising from complexity (Weber & Glynn, 2006). Weber and Glynn (2006) build on various scholars who state that leaders are overloaded with incoming information and impulses due to these digital times (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008); "doing" swallows up reflecting and learning (Amulya, 2004; Raelin, 2002). Literature states that a growing number of leaders experience an accelerating force and "no time to think" (Raelin, 2002). Van Mourik (2022) illustrates this by explaining how, specifically in public organisations, political pressure and hierarchy overrule the desire for reflective moments, dialogue and learning processes.

We define reflective practices as the process of learning through and from experience to gain new insights (Boud & Walker, 1998; Finlay, 2008).[7] Various studies underline that reflective practices offer, above all, the time and space to address the courage to work competently and ethically at the edge of order and chaos. These studies argue that reflective practices should create space to address slow questions because of the moral dilemmas and the existential issues involved, concerning complex issues (Ghaye, 2000; Finlay, 2008; Kunneman & Suransky, 2011; Nullens, 2021). Schön (1987) contributed to the concept of reflectivity by exploring how people can learn from their experience in their daily life. He introduced the concepts of reflection-on-action (after-the-event thinking) and reflection-in-action (thinking whilst doing) as the core moments of reflectivity in leadership practices.

In summary, there is a growing force and pressure on public strategic leaders to never stop learning. In this light, leadership as a reflective process is dominant in public

6 Definition of complex specific for this chapter, based on the published article in the International Journal of Public Leadership.

7 Definition of reflectivity specific for this chapter, based on the published article in the International Journal of Public Leadership.

organisations in present times. In this study, we explore two significant dimensions: firstly, the intrapersonal and embodied reflectivity on the experiences of public strategic leaders. Secondly, the interpersonal, dialogical dimensions, which concern the processes of sense-making with others (Van der Steen et al., 2021). The main question we explore is how public strategic leaders, working in a complex societal context in combination with an accelerating force, experience these dynamics and how they experience and create reflective time and space. Based on these explorations, we generate new hypotheses for further research.

## 3.2 Methodology

As the first step in this study, we conducted a literature review, which sets out the latest insights on leadership, complexity, and the various dimensions of reflectivity. In this chapter, we share the results of the qualitative, empirical exploration of the study based on a series of thirteen in-depth interviews with public strategic leaders in strategic positions, collecting thick data for a phenomenological analysis. Phenomenological research aims to attain the eidetic meanings of a "lived experience." Methodologically, the concept of "lived experience" is defined by the phenomenological question it raises: "What is this experience like?" (Van Manen, 2017).

We chose this qualitative approach since lived experience refers to ordinary, everyday experiences. In this study, we consider "reflective moments" to be daily and ordinary experiences in the practices of many leaders. Furthermore, drawing on the key concepts of leadership, complexity and reflective practices, we wish to explore personal and existential experiences and struggles.

We employed this methodology to elevate the significance of daily experiences by interpreting the unique meaning within each experience expressed by public strategic leaders (following Van Manen, 2017; Dahlberg et al., 2008).

In our sample strategy, we selected thirteen participants at a strategic level in complex public organisations, both men (8) and women (5). Each of them works as a strategic leader in a public organisation with complex challenges, such as health (3), government (6), education (1), and social organisations (3). These public strategic leaders were selected based on their involvement in a context influenced by current times. We personally invited 22 participants with an active, reflective practice as members of the so-called "Reflection Room" (9) or other reflective programmes (4). Thirteen of them participated. We selected these public strategic leaders with concrete recent reflective experiences and the ability to express their reflections in an interview. This relatively small sample enabled the collection of lived experiences (thick data) and a thorough, critical phenomenological analysis of each lived experience.

The data collection method was an in-depth, open interview with each leader individually. The key concepts offered an outline for the interview, with a focus on collecting lived experiences. As it is a phenomenological exploration, we did not have a strict protocol but an open, attentive explorative inquiry. Following Dahlberg et al. (2008), we created a profile sketch for each participant based on the lived experiences. This process of "making a lived analysis," involved inferring meaning both from what we directly heard, observed, and felt, from the underlying subtext of the conversation. During the interview, the depth of the experiences was explored by questions on both intrapersonal and interpersonal reflective practices. Table 1 shows the outline of the in-depth interviews.

To analyse the thick data, we created thirteen documents, one per leader, containing observations, reflections, and analyses derived from the audio recordings and notes. We engaged in a reflective analysis on this data, making handwritten notes and comments to explore the essence of each manager's lived experience. Following the phenomenological approach of Dahlberg et al. (2008), we conducted a close reading of the data with an open, inquiring mind, deliberately avoiding selection or interpretation. To interpret the data, we combined this open phenomenological approach with the coding system of AtlasTi. We approached every experience as a unique phenomenon. This resulted in 1,084 codes, 1,413 quotes, 24 memos, and 41 clusters. The clusters formed the basis for qualitatively analysing the leaders' experiences to answer the main question of this study. The lived experiences offered 1,413 verbatim quotations (as formulated by Patton, 2002). We summarised the most remarkable findings, asking ourselves phenomenological questions: What catches our attention? What themes and clusters emerge?

**Table 1**. Outline of in-depth interviews

1. Introduction of research, interview, and the confidentiality
2. Introduction of the themes. Sharing the themes in more or less the following order:
   - Ask: Could you describe what the following key concepts, "complexity," "acceleration," and "struggles," mean to you in your practice? Could you give examples of concrete situations? Reflect together on the answers.
   - Reflective practice; alone and/or with others. Could you give examples of concrete situations? Reflect together on the answers.
   - Emotions of shame and discomfort; Could you give examples of concrete situations? Reflect together on the answers.
   - Reflect together on the interview.

## 3.3 Results of the qualitative phenomenological study

Before laying out the reflective practices of the public strategic leaders, we explore the lived experiences they describe as complex and their relationship to these challenges. From the 1,084 codes grouped into 41 clusters, 359 codes pertained directly to the complex challenges faced by the thirteen leaders.

We wonder what themes and new hypotheses emerge when examining the lived experiences with an open, inquiring mind. The experiences of the thirteen public strategic leaders are distilled into six challenges. We have chosen to share quotes from the most illustrative experiences.

### a. The main challenges shared in the lived experiences

- *Forces within volatile and complex stakeholder fields*

First, the participants described experiences arising from forces within volatile and complex stakeholder fields, environments characterised by multiple forms of joint responsibility and hierarchies.

One leader in health care expressed:

> *"Our care organisation must work with four counties because we provide addiction treatment. Moreover, we also deal with the municipality because we offer sheltered housing, day-care and homeless shelters. The complexity arises because you always must know how your organisation is structured and where you are going and often, because of the volatile force field, one of those two is missing."*

The second illustrative experience concerning stakeholder field complexity, was expressed by a municipal leader:

> *"We had several austerity assignments. Moreover, if you must make millions in cuts, the consideration is, since this issue concerns society, shouldn't society be asked: "How should we do this together?" At that moment, some people got very nervous because it was a new and complex approach."*

Both quotes illustrate the intensity of the complex issues in a stakeholder's field. These issues lie mainly across organisational borders, forcing leaders to cope with insecure processes and unpredictable outcomes. The participants shared how they reflect on this complexity and the forthcoming insecurity and unpredictability. One leader described an image of a puzzle:

> *"I came from the school of thinking 'anything is possible'; the question is only how. From this perspective, complexity is like a puzzle; all the pieces are there with which the puzzle must be completed. Moreover, somewhere in my career, I realised: forget about putting the whole puzzle together because there are too many pieces; it is often too complex. It is more of an ambiguous puzzle. And then you get stuck in the question 'how.' So, the new battle I have fought is 'not everything is possible.' That has been decisive in avoiding a prolonged search for the total overview. Now I realise that if you have several pieces of the puzzle, it already gives you a picture or a direction."*

- *Complex issues and new challenges*

Secondly, the public strategic leaders shared lived experiences concerning complex issues and new challenges. These experiences were coloured by the leaders' specific work field, such as the energy transition, increasingly complex behaviour among patients, increasing demands in special education, or administrative system issues. The participants generally described experiences in which they acknowledged and accepted these issues and challenges.

As one leader articulated, "We do not use words such as 'complex,' 'problems,' or 'issues.' Using words like these places immediate pressure on me and others. I do not want to work like that."

These lived experiences were generally discussed as relevant to their daily practice, but not as a disturbing struggle. The participants generally considered these experiences to be attractive and challenging. To illustrate this, they used metaphors drawn from top sports, describing themselves as athletes on their way to beat the competition. They described the complex context as a Champions League. These metaphors were used to highlight the challenges' attractiveness and the thrill they bring.

One leader stated, "Working in the top league of complexity and challenges helps me stretch and improve daily. I do realise how much I have learned and the degree of complexity and acceleration I can handle. It's as if constantly facing a triathlon."

- *The adjustment to digital and hybrid work*

Next to these challenges, the third most prevalent examples the public strategic leaders shared, were the adjustments to hybrid work due to rapid technological changes.[8] Both positive and negative experiences related to this theme were described; from new terms such as "digital intimacy" to feelings of exhaustion and functioning as a "productive robot." These experiences reflect the new way of working as a team, primarily illustrating the new questions and new concerns without clear answers or solutions: Digital work is still in its infancy, meaning you must give people a considerable measure of co-responsibility.

8 The interviews were conducted in 2021-2022, in the post-COVID-19 pandemic years.

However, you can only make it partially non-committal, and you must ensure there are several checkpoints. The question is whether we still have sufficient control, an understanding of the integral approach and necessary coordination. Moreover, at a distance there is a certain degree of non-committal risk.

- *The accelerated work dynamic and alienating forces*

The fourth most striking lived experience mentioned by the public strategic leaders was the constant pressure to accelerate themselves and others. The experiences show the 'enslaving'[9] pressure that comes with being accountable working at high pace, often 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They report various lived experiences of shrinking time, wanting to do more in less time. One leader put this as, "I see a tendency of leaders around me who want to get results and score quickly. We become uncomfortable when things are unclear and uncertain." Another interviewee stated, "If you have an ultimate responsibility as a leader, you must always take everything seriously. You can't ease up."

Generally, the stress the participants report is a daily struggle. Even though they relativise complexity as a problem, they also describe how they are under "constant pressure due to the chaotic dynamics, resulting in unrelenting stress and tension." Several declare that "most people working here are regularly on the edge of burnout."

In general, most participants take the pressure as a given, having the freedom to choose a slower pace from time to time and to "go off the radar" for a few hours when they need to slow down and come to their senses again. One leader illustrated, "I regularly lose connection with my deeper senses, as if there is a solid slide between my head and body, due to the digital work and constant productivity."

In this light, the participants shared experiences of "an uncontrollable pace" and, as a result, "a feeling of alienation within their context." A few of them experience "room to play with time and experience a healthy balance."

- *Area of tension: acting versus waiting*

Furthermore, all participants described lived experiences that reveal an awareness of changing paradigms regarding their role as leaders. They share how they "constantly reflect to figure out either to do this (one side of the pole) or that (the other side of the pole)", realising that both choices have a shadow side and that "there is never a simple one-stop solution in the chaotic processes." The most frequently encountered theme that public strategic leaders address is "whether to act and intervene or wait and see how processes will co-evolve and emerge." The tension in these experiences concerns their "awareness

9 We saw a trend of addictive remarks considering the pace of work of the participants. Research shows tha the association between the work environment (specifically an overwork climate) and work addiction is stronger among individuals with predisposing traits (such as perfectionism). This suggests an interaction, whereby an accelerated, demanding work context amplifies the risk particularly for those with such predispositions (Mazzetti et al., 2014).

of their position as leaders", "the pressure of responsibility" and, at the same time, "the urgency to address the complex challenges in co-creation."

- *Relational barrier as a leader*

The last theme that comes to the fore in the lived experiences, is "the relational barrier" leaders face in sharing their "feelings, doubts, and unfinished thoughts due to their place in the hierarchy." They point out how they want to "lead and connect within a complex, hierarchical system in today's context" and the complex dynamics they encounter. For leaders and employees, their changing roles towards mutual reflectivity and co-creation become uneasy when things are at stake.

One leader articulated:

> *"My leadership position means there is always a barrier to relationship development. In an organisation that you lead, you are always the one who must stand above it. I can do that just like I can intervene in complex situations. I can do it all, but it also takes a lot from me emotionally. Is that good or not good? It has become part of my story."*

Other experiences in this theme demonstrate that participants are aware of the hierarchical structure and patterns in the organisation, e.g. as "with ministers or the alderman demanding quick answers." And at the same time, they share their experience of being part of a system, often using machine-metaphors such as "radar" and "wheel."

**b. The primary reflective practices shared in the lived experiences**

In their examples, participants distinguished two forms of reflective practices: a) proactive practices; the planned regular meetings or days outside the organisation and b) reactive practices, during emotional incidents and distress as part of the work process. All interviewees valued the relevance of both forms. Some called the planned reflectivity "the active reflectivity", and the more reactive "passive reflectivity." Above all, participants pointed out that they "highly value reflectivity as part of their intense role and position." In contrast, most participants do not have a systematic way of intrapersonal reflecting. Three of the thirteen participants have "an agenda structured with specific time slots for reflection." The study of the reflective practices of public strategic leaders also shows that "slower and deeper reflective time is mainly spent at home, in the evening, and during the weekend."

A dominant pattern is revealed in the experiences related to incident-driven moments of vulnerability and reflectivity. The pattern the participant articulated was: a) the occurrence of an unexpected emotional situation, e.g. sensing "a loss of control", a "disturbing overload" or "work conflict;" b) their reflex to withdraw at "an isolated place or their home" decompressing and recovering; c) after "processing and digesting the incident on their own or with a partner", they return the next day to work with a sense of oversight,

conclusions, and a fresh mind; and lastly, d) "connecting and sense-making with others."

The reflex "to withdraw" stood out and is in contrast with the leaders' wish to connect and reflect with others. Table 2 summarises the top six subjects that the public strategic leaders reflected on. It shows a mix of work-related issues to reflect on as well as personal issues and patterns.

**Table 2**. Summary of subjects that the public strategic leaders reflected on

| |
|---|
| Struggles and tension fields |
| Accelerated work dynamics and self-care |
| Personal emotional patterns |
| Personal history and personal drive |
| Mindset and attitude |
| The role as a leader and their presence and interventions (vocabulary and timing) |

## 3.4 Intrapersonal and interpersonal reflective practices

### *3.4.1 Intrapersonal: intuitive embodied reflective practices*

When asked "how and when they reflect intrapersonally", the participants described various practices. The most common forms of intrapersonal reflectivity were "moments with coffee at home", "reading", "philosophising", "walking alone or with a partner", "internal dialogue", "talking", "writing blogs or essays", "mindful breathing", "meditating", "therapy", "relaxing", "drawing", "listening" or "making music", and "going on nature trails or retreats." Other more unorthodox reflective practices participants applied included "dropping out" for a few hours, "adjusting the agenda" on the spot, taking "side jobs" and "excursions in other organisations" or "taking a sabbatical." These participants emphasised the importance of "the body as a mediating link" between "internal and external experience", and between "meaning and action." All of them described themselves as "first and foremost intuitive and creative beings." However, they also demonstrated little awareness or ideas on "how to integrate this into their work." Most public strategic leaders struggle with "rationality in work", stating that "others expect solid and predictable solutions." It is a broadly shared experience, analogous to a "prisoner's dilemma", in which they are "locked in a collective paradigm of rationality all while sharing a similar desire to broaden it", as noted by Peterson (2015).

### *3.4.2 Interpersonal reflective practices: dialogical sense-making*

The second reflective dimension dominant in the existing literature concentrates on leadership as an interactive, interpersonal process of dialogue with others. When asked how they reflect interpersonally as a public strategic leader, the participants described various

practices and experiences. All participants stated that "this aspect of reflectivity is a daily reality in their role." They shared various experiences of how they "lead by connecting with others to face the challenges." We observed different mindsets concerning the role of a leader in this interpersonal dimension. Several participants focused on themselves (me), and on others, with the invitation, "Help me to think." Others are focused on involving themselves in the process of others (you) with the question, "How can I help?" The third mindset was adopted by participants with a mindset of helping "us" by expressing, "Since I do not know, I need others to connect and reflect. It is an emergent process of discovering together."

On the other hand, the participants shared lived experiences, revealing "barriers to connecting and co-creating in an equal exchange." First, the majority shared how they, "due to the time pressure, lack the mental space to explicitly share their thoughts and ideas with others." Secondly, almost all of them pointed out "the relational barriers arising from their power and position." A third barrier mentioned by all participants were "their more 'personal struggles', 'emotions', 'patterns' and 'fears', influencing their 'openness' to 'show themselves' in a 'vulnerable' state." They described various lived experiences illustrating the "precariousness" of the role of a public strategic leader.

## 3.5 Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, we specifically explored the meaning public strategic leaders attribute to the concept of reflectivity to generate new hypotheses. Based on the outcomes, we wondered: What draws our attention? What themes and hypotheses appear and emerge for further research? As an outcome, we formulate seven phenomena with new hypotheses and implications. Table 3 summarises the seven phenomena, followed by an explanation.

**Table 3**. Seven phenomena on leadership and reflectivity

| |
|---|
| Complexity as an attractive asset |
| Avoidance of sharing vulnerable struggles as a reflex |
| Accelerated work dynamics and constant stress |
| Contradictory mindsets; fixed versus growth mindset |
| Tension of being a leader and a public servant |
| Gap between theory and practice |
| Reflectivity; a socially correct concept |

### 3.5.1 Complexity as an attractive asset

The participants were critical of the assumed pressure of complex challenges. They emphasised the attractiveness of this part of their work and context. They generally considered these challenges "attractive, challenging them in their reflectivity." In this light, the number of top sport metaphors used in the lived experiences were meaningful. This outcome brings a nuance to the perspective of various scholars who emphasise the problematic side of these challenges for leaders.

### 3.5.2 Avoidance of sharing vulnerable struggles as a reflex

In analysing the reflective practices related to emotional incidents, a dominant reflex emerged in the leaders' stories: when they experience distress, such as a loss of control, emotional overload, or workplace conflict, their initial response is to withdraw. Alone, they "decompress", "recover", "reflect", "interpret" and "come to their senses." This comes across as a "flight response" to stress, and a reflex to "maintain control and stability" for the benefit of others (McCarty, 2016). Although they aspire to be connecting leaders, their initial instinct in the context of ambiguity is to avoid sharing emotions or vulnerable struggles. This may be reinforced by perceptions of others, who expect the image of a "strong leader."

### 3.5.3 Addictive pace, constant stress and physical intelligence

Generally, the primary challenge reported by participants is the constant state of stress. Although they often relativise complexity as a problem, they simultaneously describe "being under constant pressure from chaotic dynamics, resulting in sustained stress and tension." Their struggles reveal patterns rooted in personal values and mindset in phrases such as "I have to work hard," "maximise talents," "always take everything seriously," and "perform 100% at high speed and never ease off."

Rosa's view (2016, 2019) concerning "alienation" and a need for more "resonance" when it comes to reflectivity is interesting for further research. He pleads for resonance, "offering a basis for experiencing a slower, more profound, meaningful and transformative rapport between leaders and their environment of acceleration and the shrinking of time."

### 3.5.4 Contradictory mindsets: fixed versus growth mindset

In the interviews, it became clear that participants act and reflect using two contradictory paradigms: on the one hand, the open, receptive paradigm we summarise as the "growth mindset," with "a readiness to experiment and learn" (Dweck, 2016). On the other hand, there is the control paradigm of judgement and fear, the "fixed mindset" with "an attachment to the outcome of the issues at hand" (Dweck, 2016). This underlying tension is the source of most struggles of the participants and the cause of their most dominant reflexes: "to work and learn hard at the same time."

### 3.5.5 Area of tension of being a leader and a public servant

We wonder what the more profound desire for public strategic leaders is "to work hard" at a continuously "addictive pace." This phenomenon raises questions about the role of public strategic leaders employ in a public organisation, being both "leader" and "public servant." In various experiences, their loyalty and servant mindset working within a regulated system overrule their leadership and autonomy. From the perspective of Ehrenberg (2010); and the "paradox of autonomy" he describes, one could question if reflectivity has also become an "overregulated instrument" and a "mode of dominance."

### 3.5.6 Gap between theory and practice

This contradictory mindset creates a gap between theory and practice, revealing a discrepancy between the "espoused theory" found in literature and the "theory-in-use" observed in these participants (Kerr & Todd, 2021). Three themes emerge from this gap. First, the espoused theory holds that "good leaders are reflective and address slow questions." Secondly, it asserts that "good leaders are co-creative and share meaning with others through reflectivity." Lastly, it posits that "good leaders are reflective, wise, and self-aware."

### 3.5.7 Reflectivity: a socially correct concept

In the interviews, the feeling of "socially correct behaviour" crept upon us. The subject of reflective practices and their habits and patterns enticed the participants to show first, how reflective they were by sharing numerous examples. The personal invitation and the theme of reflective practices might have caused this limitation. The participants were critical at certain moments during the interview, but none were critical concerning the subject of reflectivity. The assumption was in their approach; "the more reflective, the better", delivering a series of lived experiences with contradictory information. The concept of "leadership as reflective and relation process" appeared to be dominant in explaining the required view on leadership currently. We suspect a "canonical effect" in this study of the reflective concepts concerning leadership, building on Mattingly (2019). The "canonical effect" refers to the phenomenon where certain concepts dominate an intellectual landscape and hinder the critical gaze; the concepts become "frozen" (Mattingly, 2019).

These outcomes, based on the lived experiences of Dutch public strategic leaders, can be considered illustrative for other strategic leaders in democratic countries dealing with a similarly complex context. The limitation of this study is the relatively small sample. This limitation asks for further research in order to formulate relevant hypotheses.

Lastly, we wonder if planned reflectivity could become "a goal in itself" and an "overregulated ritual." The ethical question of why reflectivity in a particular context is essential, and with which aim or subject becomes increasingly relevant for leaders, coaches, and educators.

This new hypothesis offers a new starting point for further critical phenomenological research into the ethics and the instrumental rationality of reflectivity in the practices of public strategic leaders. There is a risk that reflectivity is approached as a socially desirable ritual. Considering the needs and desires the participants shared, we wonder at the end of this chapter: Is there a growing importance of reflective time and space or, above all, meaningful relations and resonant moments in the context of alienating forces?

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4

# Chapter 4

## A narrative exploration of a utopic story; Public strategic leaders and their reflective practice in accelerated times

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## Chapter summary

A central question in the current leadership debate is how public strategic leaders can reflect and find meaning in today's complex and accelerated environment. This chapter compares three dominant theories with the experiences of public strategic leaders. The literature states that the answer to adaptive challenges is for leaders in organisations to create time to reflect and create meaning with others. The limitation of these studies is that they do not explore leaders' experiences. We fill this gap by examining the experiences of public strategic leaders and exploring their implications. We qualitatively explore the experiences of 25 public strategic leaders using interviews, group dialogues and surveys. The central finding is an alarming gap between theory and practice. This is a concern due to the utopic ideology of reflectivity, which fails to account for the prevailing forces within political and bureaucratic organisations, as well as leaders' own perceptions of their roles. The narrative exploration reveals a pattern of participants trying "to do good," while avoiding disruptions caused by doubts, emotions, or intuitions. The experiences of the public strategic leaders reveal three persistent ideologies that place pressure on their reflective space in daily practice. These narratives offer a starting point for public organisations seeking to understand and develop the reflective practices of strategic leaders. This chapter opens a debate about leadership and reflectivity paradigms in theory and practice. It offers a reality check for the daily practices of leaders and coaches, countering the often-utopian theories.

## 4.1 Introduction

A central question for public strategic leaders is how to reflect and find meaning in today's accelerated environment, where they must tackle problems too complex to resolve, face unpredictability, and do things they have never done before (Heifetz, 1994; Vaill, 1996).

This chapter aims to explore how three dominant theoretical narratives are reflected in the experiences of public strategic leaders. Lord et al. (2020) state that leadership is "shaped" by others' perceptions of leadership; "this is primarily driven by the unconscious and unconsidered conceptual images, mental structures or templates that capture what people expect from leaders" (Lord et al., 2020).

This study responds to the scholarly consensus that strategic leaders face increasingly complex changes, diverse adaptive challenges, and an "accelerating deluge of information" (Raelin, 2002; Obolensky, 2014; Rosa, 2019; Haslam et al., 2020). Other scholars state that "the digital era overloads leaders with incoming information and impulses" (Rosenberg and Feldman, 2008). The starting point for these scholars is the concern that a growing number of leaders experience an acceleration force and have "no time to think" (Raelin, 2002). "Doing swallows up reflecting and learning" (Amulya, 2004; Raelin, 2002).

In this light, the general statement is that "leaders need to create time to think and reflect on their mindset and role, 'creating meaning' for themselves as an answer to the complexity, uncertainty and acceleration" (Kornelsen, 2019). Another central theme relevant to this study is the concern of a shrinking of time, which, according to Rosa (2019), "leads to the phenomenon where people are unable to form meaningful relationships of mutual understanding, neither with their material surroundings nor with their fellow human beings." As the root of this disability, he pinpointed "the constant striving for modernistic control and predictability" (Lijster & Celikates, 2019).

The main concern in this study is that the concept of reflectivity is often used as a self-evident, frozen concept in literature and among public strategic leaders in public organisations. Finlay (2008) argued that "reflectivity was used as an umbrella or canopy term to signify something good or desirable." Amongst other things, she underlines that "reflective practices have become a critical stand in the fields of continuing development, work-based learning, and lifelong learning" (Eby, 2000; Finlay, 2008; Van der Steen et al., 2021). The limitation of earlier studies is their failure to explore the deeper meaning of the lived experiences of public strategic leaders in practice.

In this chapter, we fill this gap by exploring the experiences and struggles of public strategic leaders. We conducted this exploration from a "with-ness perspective" to gain insight into the lived experiences of public strategic leaders (Shotter, 2006). This contrasts with the often-theoretical "about-ness perspective" that prescribed how leaders should behave

(Shotter, 2006; in the research tradition of Mintzberg, 1973; Rhodes & Noordegraaf, 2007; Noordegraaf, 2000; Van Dorp, 2023). The chapter dives into reflectivity as a source of meaning in accelerated times. As a starting point, we explore the foundational concept of reflective practices, followed by three dominant theories Van der Steen et al. (2023) describe in their study. We compare these theories with the experience of public strategic leaders in organisations. We aim to question these dominant narratives as a starting point for further research.

## 4.2 Methodology

We chose a qualitative approach, using narrative research to explore the narratives present in literature and the lived experiences of public strategic leaders. In choosing a qualitative approach, we follow Rhodes and Noordegraaf (2007), who highlighted the value of qualitative research to study public leaders. They state that "political sciences provide limited help in understanding top-level 'bureaucrats' behaviour and their motivations." Ritchie et al. (2003) confirm this, stating that "narrative explorations of experiences offer an open and revealing perspective of the blind spots, and thereby provide a starting point for theories that explain social processes and actions."

We contribute to the phenomenological study of Van der Steen et al. (2023) with the data of thirteen in-depth interviews with public strategic leaders (semi-structured, of which four online and nine face-to-face interviews). In this study, we analyse this "thick data" with a phenomenological lens, as noted by Dahlberg et al. (2008). In line with the phenomenological approach of Dahlberg et al. (2008), we conducted a close reading with an open, inquiring mind, avoiding selecting or interpreting. To analyse the thick data, we created thirteen documents, each containing leaders' observations, reflections, and analyses based on the audio recordings and our notes. We reflected on the data by making handwritten notes and comments based on each participant's lived experience and our own observations, seeking to explore the essence of their experience (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

We combined this open phenomenological approach with AtlasTi's coding system to interpret the data. We approached every experience as unique (Dahlberg et al., 2008). This resulted in 1084 descriptions, 1413 quotes, 24 memos, and 41 rough clusters (Van der Steen et al., 2023). In the next phase, we conducted a new study with twelve additional public strategic leaders, using group dialogues in a focus group and open surveys. The narratives of 25 of these participants were explored inductively. Based on the initial findings, we adopted Mattingly's approach (2019), urging alertness to *frozen* concepts that reveal persistent paradigms (Arendt, 2003; Mattingly, 2019).

In the samples, we selected the first thirteen, and later in the additional study twelve, public participants at a strategic level in complex public organisations, both men (sixteen) and women (nine). Each participant works in a public organisation such as health (seven), government (nine), education (six) and social organisations (three).

We included additional group dialogues to explore, in detail, the narratives that emerge between public strategic leaders in practice. In addition to these group dialogues, we conducted a qualitative survey to collect additional personal and private thoughts from public strategic leaders, thereby avoiding the effect of socially desirable answers and group thinking. We analysed these written responses from the twelve participants to the open-ended questions on reflectivity and leadership. All the thick data were extracted and bundled into a series of narratives through an inductive and interpretive analysis, as noted by Griffin & May (2012). We analysed, "how do public strategic leaders interpret and construct their experiences shaping their social reality concerning leadership and reflectivity?" Given the collective process, we refer to interviewees no. 1–13, survey participants no. 1–12 and the group dialogue in this chapter.

## 4.3 Dominant narratives on leadership and reflectivity in the existing theory

Based on the literature review conducted by Van der Steen et al. (2021), we first illuminate the concept of reflective practices in the context of public leadership. In general, they state that the concept of reflectivity is fragmented and has multiple meanings (Van der Steen et al., 2021). They elaborate on two dimensions and two forms of reflective practices, as summarised in Table 1.

They identify two dimensions of reflectivity in leadership literature. First of all, the dimension of 'intrapersonal' reflective practices (Van der Steen et al., 2021). This concept is defined by Boud et al. (1998) as "the process of learning from experience towards gaining new insights" (Finlay, 2008). They built on the view of Schön (1987), whose concern was "the undervaluation of the 'practical knowledge of action' central to practitioners' work." Additionally, Schön underlines the relevance of intrapersonal reflection-in-action. In this light, Dewey (1933) defines this dimension of reflectivity with an emphasis on doubt, hesitation and perplexity related to a directly experienced situation.

**Table 1**. Two dimensions and two forms of reflective practices in summary

| Dimensions and forms | Proactively planned reflective practices | Reactive reflective practices, in the work process |
|---|---|---|
| Intrapersonal reflective practices (introspective) | Individual planned reflective practices: reflective writing, coaching, retreats, walks in nature etc. | Individual reactive reflective practices; reflectivity in action in the work process; exploring and giving meaning to the experience |
| Interpersonal reflective practices (relational) | Planned reflective practices with others in dialogue, such as meetings, programs, etc. | Reactive reflective practices with others, such as reflecting in the moment, exploring, and giving meaning to the mutual process |

The second dimension identified by the literature review of Van der Steen et al. (2021) is the "interpersonal, relational, reflective practices." For example, described by Frimann and Hersted (2016), who plead for the construction of meaning in uncertain, ambiguous situations as a participatory narrative process of "co-authoring." They build on the view of Gergen (1999), who argues that "the creation of meaningful 'language' requires 'social coordination' and a process of 'communal relationship', asking for a curious mindset and the listening to others beyond disputing or blaming" (Gergen, 1999). As Gergen, Weick (2005) was one of the first to address anxiety and confusion in the work with the idea of "meaning making of disruptive phenomena as a relational process" (Weick, 2005).

In addition to these dimensions, two distinct forms of reflectivity emerged from the empirical study by Van der Steen et al. (2023) on public strategic leaders: a) the proactively "planned" reflective practices, such as regular meetings or days outside the organisation and b) "reactive" reflective practices during emotional incidents and distress in the work process.

In the following paragraphs, we specifically explore the three dominant narratives central to this study, which is grounded in a phenomenological empirical inquiry. This inquiry examines both "intrapersonal" and "interpersonal" reflective practices, including "planned" and "reactive" reflectivity (Van der Steen et al., 2023).

Firstly, we explore the narrative that "good leaders are reflective and address 'slow questions'." Secondly, we question the narrative that "good leaders reflect interpersonally, are co-creative and share meaning in dialogue." Lastly, we explore the narrative that "good leaders reflect intrapersonally and act wise and self-aware" (Van der Steen et al., 2023). Table 2 summarises these narratives.

**Table 2**. Summary of three dominant narratives in theory

| |
|---|
| Narrative 1: Good leaders are reflective and address slow questions |
| Narrative 2: Good leaders reflect interpersonally and co-create in dialogue |
| Narrative 3: Good leaders reflect intrapersonally and act wise and self-aware |

The paradigms identified in theory and practice will be summarized in three further tables.

### *4.3.1 Narrative 1: Good leaders are reflective and address slow questions*

In general, literature emphasises that leaders are facing a growing number of questions and wicked issues, which demand a fundamentally new perspective on leadership (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Rhodes & Noordegraaf, 2007; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2011; Obolensky, 2014; Haslam et al., 2020).

Rittel and Webber already in 1973 introduced the concept of "wicked issues," as opposed to "tame issues", referring to "complex and new societal problems." In this light, Van der Wal (2017) refers to the term VUCA, underlining "volatility as the magnitude and dynamics of change", and "uncertainty as the unpredictability" specifically in public management (Horney et al., 2010; Van der Wal, 2017). "Complexity stands for the chaos surrounding organisations", and "ambiguity describes the haziness of reality and the mixed meanings of conditions" (Horney et al., 2010; Kornelsen, 2019). Heifetz (1994) emphasises that these wicked problems are "too complex to resolve and require social engagement and support." Adaptive problems are, in this light, defined as challenges that require a new form of reflective practice (Heifetz, 1994; Grint, 2010). Vaill (1996) underlines the urgency of learning, through the metaphor of the "permanent white water": the unpredictable environment in which leaders operate. He explains how this "non-stop white water puts leaders in a position of doing things they have never done before, making effective learning a critical skill" (Vaill, 1996). Grint (2010) and Potter (2015) state that the adaptive challenges leaders face, require a new form of reflective practice with a deeper attention structure, inviting them to explore "slow questions" (Grint, 2010; Potter, 2015; Kunneman & Suransky, 2011).

Kunneman and Suransky (2011) go a step further, arguing that "addressing slow questions and fostering meaningful relations are critical for leaders as they navigate adaptive challenges and shrinking time, which arise from the moral dilemmas and existential issues at the strategic level."

### *4.3.2 Narrative 2: Good leaders reflect interpersonally and co-create in dialogue*

In the existing literature, many scholars, like Frimann and Hersted (2016), go a step further than Kunneman and Suransky (2011), by advocating for an "explicit interpersonal narrative of leadership." This narrative centres on the "co-creative construction of meaning" in today's uncertain and ambiguous contexts, where meaning is shared through dialogue (Frimann and Hersted, 2016).

In their view, "meaning emerges when leaders involve employees and other stakeholders in their processes." In this sense, leadership is described "as the social construction of meaning between parties to face challenges" (Frimann and Hersted, 2016).

Various concepts address "sense-making" and reflective practices as sources of meaning creation in organisations, drawing on Weick (2005). Weick (2005) has laid the foundation for these concepts by describing how meaning making occurs in the presence of "disruptive phenomena, anxiety, and confusion." He defines sense-making as the "ongoing retrospective development of plausible images" that rationalise people's actions (Weick, 2005). In this view, Frimann and Hersted (2016) suggest that leadership as co-authoring must be perceived as a "participatory, narrative process of sense-making." Considering the definition of dialogue, Isaacs (1999) underscores that "dialogue is more than just the exchange of words; instead, it is the embrace of different points of view." It is literally "the art of thinking together." In this light, Haslam et al. (2020) followed up with a social-psychological perspective on leadership, exploring how leadership emerges. They contributed to leadership theory with the conception of leadership as a "shared social identity", a sense of "us" that connects leaders and followers into a joint group (Haslam et al., 2020). They place followers in an "agentic role; followers confer leadership, and their collective effort is essential to bringing a leader's proposals to fruition."

### *4.3.3 Narrative 3: Good leaders reflect intrapersonally and act wise and self-aware*

The general narrative in the existing literature is that leaders in organisations need "to create time to reflect on their mindset and role" (Kornelsen, 2019). Schön (1987) introduced the concepts of "reflection-on-action", "after-the-event thinking" and "reflection-in-action", "thinking while doing" as the core moments of reflectivity in leadership practices, and Vaughan pleads for "a deep awareness of multiple levels of consciousness such as mental, emotional, physical and spiritual awareness." (Schön, 1987; Vaughan, 2002). Others emphasised that leaders should not only focus on "how to act" but, above all, be conscious of "why they act a certain way" (Goleman, 2012).

In this light, Küpers and Statler (2008) point at the Aristotelian concept of "practical wisdom and the Greek phronesis" (Küpers & Statler, 2008). For Aristotle, the critical distinction between practical wisdom and knowledge was that practical wisdom involved "experiential encounters and experiences with particular lived situations, above scientific and rational knowledge" (Küpers & Statler, 2008). We also mention Snowden and Boone's (2007) quote, underlining that "wise executives tailor their approach to fit the complexity of the circumstances they face," to emphasise the central role of the wise executives.

## 4.4 Exploration of dominant narratives of public strategic leaders in practice

This section dives into the data with a narrative approach employed to examine the three dominant theoretical narratives in practice. For each theme, we examined closely the experiences and observations of the participants expressed during the interviews, group dialogues, and surveys. In the last section, we reflect on these results.

### *4.4.1 Narrative 1: Good leaders are reflective and address slow questions*

Considering the theoretical foundation for this theme described earlier, we present the most remarkable experiences and observations from the interviews, group dialogues and surveys, guided by the question: Which paradigms are revealed in leaders' narratives of their experiences?

First, the leaders' experiences reveal a pattern rooted in their active values and mindset. The most illustrative metaphors in the leaders' use of language were, for example, "always switched on," "working hard," "never ease up," and "perform 100% at high speed" (e.g. survey-participant SP-3 and interviewee I-6). One director stated, "as a director in this community, I am my role, 24/7; I am never not in function. Everybody watches." (SP-8). One participant explains, "I see a tendency among leaders to want to get results and score quickly. We become uncomfortable when things are unclear and uncertain." Later, he states, "If you are responsible as a leader, you must always take everything seriously. You can't ease off." Another participant underlines: "Most people working here are regularly on the edge of a burnout" (I-12), whereas other participants describe "hard-working as addictive and a source of adrenaline and flow" (SP-4 and SP-5) or in other words, "I am always switched on, and I work too much, that is how much I like it" (SP-7).

The survey highlights the tension between working hard, dictated by Chronos (planned time) and self-care, slowing down with an eye for Kairos (propitious timing) that was often mentioned in the interviews, as noted by Rämö (2002). 100% of the survey participants confirmed this as a tension and struggle, with, for example, one leader stating, "Work is often addictive. I do not fret but enjoy thinking about tough issues" (SP-4), or "Addictive yes, alienating no" (SP-6), and "I am always switched on. There are a few times when I do not think about my work. Even during holidays the thinking continues" (SP-9).

Secondly, in our observation, several participants began working hard during the interviews, lecturing the researchers on the difference between "wicked" and "tame" and "complex" and "complicated" as an apparent and relevant approach (I-4, I-8 and I-14). All participants appeared to be educated on the concepts of wickedness and the Cynefin framework, as outlined by Snowden and Boone (2007) and Fierro et al. (2018). Another example of the experienced pressure when slowing down was a brief exchange between a

leader and her chauffeur at the start of the interview (I-10). The chauffeur stated, "I will pick you up in half an hour." The leader replied, "Sorry, we will have an interview for 1.5 hours." He reacted with a frown and stated he would remain 'on standby' in case of need. The participant joked, "All my meetings are scheduled for 30 minutes. This will probably be considered as an afternoon off." Perplexing in this example is the chauffeur controlling the leaders' time, the leader replying with "sorry" and the metaphor of "an afternoon off." It illustrates the mindset of the leader, who is also influenced by others in their direct surroundings. In Table 3, we summarise the paradigms in theory and practice.

**Table 3**. Paradigms in theory and practice: on reflectivity and slow questions

| Dominant paradigms in theory on reflectivity and slow questions | Paradigm in practice on reflectivity and slow questions |
|---|---|
| Adaptive problems require a new form of reflective practice | A leader is a central and problem-solving person: responsible and available for others |
| The urgency of learning to consider the unpredictable environment in which leaders work | A leader works hard and controls the interview, explaining, teaching and showing good examples |
| Adaptive challenges require a deeper attention structure inviting them to explore slow questions | A leader involves reflectivity in his/her practice to stay in control |

In summary, the study shows how public strategic leaders interpret their role as "central problem-solvers" with "the constant pressure of others projecting expectations onto them." The study reveals an overall discourse of control and responsibility defining the position of public leaders.

### *4.4.2 Narrative 2: Good leaders reflect interpersonally–co-create in dialogue*

Building on the earlier described theoretical foundation for this theme, we put forward the most remarkable experiences and observations, asking: Which paradigms are revealed in the narrative of the participants in practice? Generally, the narratives of the public strategic leaders on this theme are twofold.

They state that they "lead by connecting," but their interactions show something else. One example that stood out comes from an online interview in which a leader began a twenty-five-minute monologue on his view of leadership and reflectivity (I-3). He introduced the monologue by explaining that "he had prepared himself and assumed we wanted to first and foremost hear his perspective and answers." He explained his vision of sense-making and "leading others through connecting and co-creation."

Furthermore, the participants expressed how they struggle with the relational process; for example, (I-8), stating, "At some point, I become like the 'superman.' They constantly put me on the spot." The focus group dialogues also highlighted the pressure from others in

daily exchanges. One relational obstacle is the power imbalance: "They make it all about me" and later, "I cannot change the projections of others." The words "I" and "they" were used constantly, illustrating a pattern of reactive and defensive responses, stating, "Yes, but they blame me for…" or "Yes, but they expect …"

The survey highlighted the tension between "acting and reflecting alone" versus "together in co-creation" often expressed in the interviews. 83% of the survey participants confirmed to experience this as a tension and struggle. Moreover, more specifically, three of them (SP-3, SP-5, SP-8, and SP-9) confirmed the statement, "I feel like I need to connect and co-create, but often doing it alone is easier or faster," with SP-9 explaining, for example, "It might sound arrogant (it probably is), but my brain is so fast and creative that I have more peace of mind on my own. On the other hand, I cannot work alone. So, I know that working together is ultimately faster to get things done" (SP-9).

Another recurring narrative concerns the leaders' perspective on reflectivity when under stress or caught off guard (I-3, I-7, I-8, and I-9): "When caught off guard in an emotional incident during work, I will not share my feelings, doubts, and questions as that could disrupt others." They explain that at these unexpected moments, "I only register my stress and tension, and become aware of my overwhelmed emotions (I-9, I-12)." The participants unanimously point out "The reflective moments with peers, family, and friends offer me a place of restoration and belonging." On the other hand, several participants cite the "art of thinking together" as a source of meaning in organisations. They describe it as, "when we face complex issues, the magic happens together; the world is too complex to approach it from one perspective" (I-1, I-3, I-9, and I-13). Another leader stated (SP-1), "I consciously choose a collective process, even though it can sketch an image of an indecisive director." The majority mentioned examples of participation, involving others, leading by connecting, and engaging others. In these examples, their language reveals they generally place themselves at the centre, involving others only when time and space allow for it. We summarise the paradigms found in theory and practice in Table 4.

The study shows how public strategic leaders interpret their role as initiators from a leader-central position (reacting to them or others). The exploration reveals an overarching discourse of pressure and power defining the positions of public leaders, highlighting their perceived precariousness. Within this context, the forces of acceleration and relentless pace consistently overrule the wish to share and reflect.

**Table 4**. Paradigms in theory and practice: On interpersonal reflectivity and co-creation in dialogue

| Paradigms in theory | Paradigms in practice |
|---|---|
| Co-creative construction of meaning in today's uncertain and ambiguous environment | The leader as the owner of the decision-making processes |
| Leaders share meaning in dialogue with others | Leader-central orientation focusing on position and role |
| As participatory narrative process of sense-making; the art of thinking together | Leaders having to live up to the perception of others; expectations, and projecting |
| Leadership as an emergent process, a shared social identity and a sense of "us" | Speed and calmness have priority over sharing and creating together |

### *4.4.3 Narrative 3: Good leaders reflect intrapersonally and act wise and self-aware*

Considering the earlier described theoretical foundation for this theme, we put forward the most remarkable experiences and observations, asking: Which paradigms are revealed in leaders' narratives of their experiences?

The first example within this theme concerns a leader we met online for the interview (I-4). She checked in late, explaining the "busy and chaotic dynamics of her political work arena." She started making coffee out of camera range, telling us "to start with the first interview question as she could still hear us while the coffee machine was running." When she returned, she was interrupted three times by urgent phone calls. When we offered to reschedule, she replied, "No time for that. Let us get it over with." While talking about reflectivity and the attention structure of leaders, she demonstrates the "hard-working" leader, acting with "no time."

The survey furthermore highlighted the tension between "reflecting aware and consciously" versus "reacting from the hip, imperfect and spontaneously" also often cited. About 83% of the survey participants confirmed this as a tension and struggle. More specifically, 50% confirmed the statement "I am doing a lot of reflection and continuous improvement, trying to be aware of everything. It is also a form of control and directing" (with 50% neutral and 0% disagree). For example, one leader stated, "Reflective practices, like supervision, have helped me a lot to stay in the present and in my power. Moreover, that requires constant maintenance" (SP-12). Another leader explained, "Reflecting is so much a second nature that sometimes I slip into it and keep rationalising, explaining, and then reflecting again. Usually, agenda pressure confines this, but some topics have many dimensions" (S-10).

Another example demonstrates a participant experiencing a moment of shame during work. We share a brief fragment of his twofold narrative to illustrate the delicacy of this process in the interviewee's approach (I-1):

*"Last week, we had to tackle a few complex issues with our board. When we had finished, I started to make a few jokes, happy for it to be the end of the day. People smiled, and I overly enthusiastically addressed a colleague, making a compliment which sounded like a joke about her contribution. The moment I stopped talking, I felt this was inappropriate behaviour, in one; overly relaxed! I know I am in a position of power, and my remarks have a disproportionate impact. However, I will never accept that as a given. This uncontrollable emotional roller-coaster is part of the continuous paradox. I did call her and listened to her discomfort, of course. Moreover, I know I will remain alert for at least several months. But then, in another moment of relaxation, I will again forget that I am no longer just 'one of the guys and girls.'"*

This leader articulated in this example a variety of interpretations; "an uncontrollable emotional roller-coaster is an unavoidable part of my job and role," "a continuous paradox is a static thing," "I must realise that I am in power; my remarks have a disproportionate impact," and "I am no longer one of the guys and girls."

Relevant in this experience, on the other hand, is "the acceptance of failure" and the "endurance of discomfort." The leader illustrates a struggle and, simultaneously, an acceptance of the ambiguity, paradoxes, emotional roller-coaster, and uncontrollable imperfection in his role. This addresses a theme expressed by several leaders: the wish to behave spontaneously and the risk of transgressive moments or interactions. Participants also described a variety of experiences in which they were transgressively approached with assaults by others, with, in their experience, feelings of being offended and discriminated against (I-12, SP-1).

One leader shared a situation: "I saw myself as who I was, and to me, it did not matter what 'colour the apple' was, I remained the same, but instead of being a 'Greek immigrant,' I suddenly was a 'white Dutch person' in the eyes of the other. If someone thinks I am a racist, that is a truth I must relate to. I considered their feelings a fact and tried to explore it from there" (SP-1).

This leader also shares a variety of interpretations: "If someone thinks something, that is a truth," and "As a leader, I have to relate to others' interpretations." In general, group conversations convey the attitude that reflecting is a wise and strategic act, doing good and avoiding discomfort in unexpected, spontaneous emotions. The participants confirmed that reflecting has become a new way of controlling the tension and acting aware and conscious (constantly learning and improving).

In the group dialogue, other participants explained how "they are free and detached from the daily hassle and able to take more distance and time." Some insights have been "sparked by illness," other "personal events," or "spiritual and profound private reflective practices." They often referred to reflective practices "outside of work as a source of inspiration." One

leader summarised this tension as "When is good- good enough, and may I accept the uncontrollability or the processes" (SP-3). Lastly, SP-9 described, "I try to trust and follow my intuitions more often. This helps me avoid endless internal reflectivity." In Table 5, we summarise the paradigms found in theory and practice.

**Table 5**. Paradigms in theory and practice: on intrapersonally reflectivity, acting wise and self-aware questions

| Paradigms in theory | Paradigms in practice |
|---|---|
| Leaders in organisations need to create time to reflect and discern their mindsets and role | A leader must rationalise and predict the outcomes |
| Reflection-on-action (after-the-event thinking) and reflection-in-action (thinking while doing) | A leader must do the right thing and know what the right thing is; reflectivity is a way to control and succeed |
| A deep awareness of multiple levels of consciousness and of why they act in a certain way | The role and the procedures of the organisation leave no space for imperfections, mistakes, emotions, or moments of shame |

The exploration shows how public strategic leaders interpret their relationships as "rational processes", allowing "little room for discomfort, imperfections, emotions, or shame" (which they perceive as risks of disturbing others). This reveals the overall discourse of a "rational leader who gives clear direction."

## 4.5 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter opens a debate about leadership and reflectivity paradigms as they occur in theory and practice. The main conclusion is that public strategic leaders experience "the pressure of acceleration", various "utopian paradigms to live up to", and "little room for profound reflectivity in the daily dynamics" and "demands of the day." The participants experience the value of reflectivity mainly in planned moments alone at home or during planned sessions where they explore wicked issues, new questions, or personal development with others.

Overall, they "withdraw from unexpected vulnerable and emotional moments in the process of the interactions", referring to the "relational break" due to their position and role as leaders.

In this study, considering the narratives the public strategic leaders share, we wonder: What do the discrepancies between theory and practice reveal when examined more closely? One central finding concerns the problematic discrepancy between theory and practice.

This is due to the utopic ideology of reflectivity, which overlooks both the contextual forces with political and bureaucratic organisations, and the public leaders' perception of their responsibility. The narrative exploration shows a pattern of participants trying to do good, and avoiding disruptions through doubts, emotions, or intuitions. The dominant narratives add an "unrealistic and seductive story to live up to." The persistent ideas create an "alienating, self-fulfilling prophecy" in which public strategic leaders find themselves stuck, expressing "envy of the freedom researchers enjoy", as opposed to being a "wheel" or "radar" within a demanding system.

Relevant is the perspective of narrative hermeneutics, which states that "events in isolation do not have meaning" but "acquire meaning in context because we surround ourselves with certain people in certain situations (Gadamer, 1975). This view points out how "people are closely intertwined with the world as a continuous, dialectical process, in which understanding is achieved dialogically" (Visse, 2014, building on Gadamer, 1975). This resonates with the outcomes of this study underlining how public strategic leaders are "dialogically intertwined with their context of political and interpersonal pressure."

They wish to live up to the theoretical ideologies. Still, in practice, their narratives reveal several forces that mute reflectivity and their narrative identity, such as "the pressure of public (and personal) expectations in a context of increasing transparency, mounting acceleration due to a dominant focus on growth and improvement, and, lastly, the mutual precariousness and growing risk of transgressive moments or interactions" drawing on Marchart (2013) and Rosa (2016). These pressures leave little space for "reflection-in-action" involving doubt, hesitation, or perplexity related to a situation experienced directly, building on Schön (1987) and Dewey (1933). Table 6 summarises three persisting ideas as revealed in the paradigms of public strategic leaders.

**Table 6**. Dominant paradigms among public strategic leaders

| |
|---|
| The heroic ideology of leadership, in control and solving problems |
| Instrumental interpretation of reflectivity as a goal-oriented- and time-consuming task |
| Rationality; little room for imperfections, emotions, and doubts in a rigid system |

We explore these three persisting ideas to further explore the implications for public strategic leaders and others in organisations:

*a. The heroic ideology of leadership; in control and solving problems*

This idea confirms the new critical demands as described by Van der Wal (2017) and Noordegraaf (2007) due to an increase in public expectations, stakeholder multiplicity, and ethical complexities. This leaves little space for human experiences such as doubt, hesitation, or perplexity related to a directly experienced situation, as Dewey (1933) pleads in his definition of reflectivity. Considering this definition, we conclude that public strategic

leaders, in general, experience an accelerated pressure, with a strong focus on solving problems as a central cockpit. When it comes down to emotions and dealing with chaos, this results in a defensive and avoidant pattern, especially when it concerns "reflection-in-action" in the interaction with others, as described in the approach of Schön (1987). Public strategic leaders share reflective experiences and ethical considerations in their narratives, mainly "reflecting-on-action after the event", drawing on the approach of Schön (1987). This outcome confirms the statements of Twist and Frissen (2024), who describe leadership as "the first and foremost central individual continually at the heart of decision-making" (Twist & Frissen, 2024; Meuleman, 2010). Specifically, in public leadership, they illustrate a "governance centrism" with leadership defined by "an action-oriented attitude" (Twist & Frissen, 2024).

Further research should explore the implications, for example, of the question: how to reflect without leaders as the centre of the process and create reflective spaces instead of the dominant solution orientation?

*b. Instrumental interpretation of reflectivity as a goal-oriented and time-consuming task*

This chapter states that the concept of reflectivity, both in theory and among public strategic leaders in practice, is fragmented and has multiple meanings. Participants use various interpretations of this concept: instrumental, ethical, existential, individual, groupwise, planned, spontaneous, rational, emotional, at home, at work, etc. It appears that reflectivity refers to a pleasant and good way of doing things, a mindset no one can be against without the nuance of a counter-narrative. We conclude that, in the context of leadership conceptual abstractions of reflection have become habitual; so habitual that they are referred to as an independent, utilitarian thing to be planned. In practice, this is often delegated to consultants or external coaches. Reflectivity is approached from the same reductionistic, goal-oriented paradigm as problem-solving, aiming for control, and rational improvement, not as a contemplating space but as an additional pressure to organise and "do good." The participants see it as their role to serve the system, and, possibly at the same time, to survive in the system.

In this matter, further research should explore the implications of how to reflect beyond the reductionist, goal-oriented orientation, exploring the actual relational, emotional, and tense aspects in the moment of interactions.

*c. Rationality: little room for imperfections, emotions, and doubts in a hierarchical and rigid system that emphasises rational learning and adapting*

This third persisting idea underscores Hernes' concern (2014) and illustrates how organisations are commonly conceptualised as "rational entities" adapting to the environment, as "two separate entities that are not interconnected in mainstream education and organisation theory." Cooper and Law (1995) underline that "the fundamental criticism

of modern sociological studies of organisation is that they deal with results or 'organised states' rather than the complex social processes that lead to the outcomes or effects."

In this light, Cooper (1992) points this phenomenon of "reification" out as "an inherent consequence of organising." He states that "formal organisation seeks to stabilise and control social processes by translating lived, relational, and temporal experiences into abstract representations" such as roles, procedures, performance indicators, and structures (Cooper, 1992). This substitution of representation has a reifying effect: persons and practices are treated as objects rather than as situated, responsive relation. While this logic promises order and efficiency, it simultaneously "obscures lived meaning by reducing complex human activity to manageable abstractions", as noted by Cooper (1992).

As a counter-narrative to this rational, organised, "reifying" approach, Hernes (2014) offers a process perspective with an inverted focus; "there is not a unitary organisational actor that acts, but there is the making of organisational actors through acting." He offers an alternative perspective of organising which defines it as "the ongoing process of making, remaking, unmaking, and relating organisational actors of all sorts: humans, technologies, concepts, groups, and the like, into meaningful wholes" (Hernes, 2014).

As a result of these persistent ideas, the conception of reflectivity in the context of leadership in public organisations has taken on a utilitarian paradigm with an alienating effect. Leaders are positioned as the centre of control, facing new demands while struggling with time pressure. They occupy a lonely, precarious position within a rigid system and are under pressure of others to correctly do and reflect according to a rigid ideology. This forces a balance between stress and transgressive behaviour.

Meanwhile, today's context challenges, above all, the acceptance of "uncontrollability and the ability to approach it as a source of meaning" (Rosa, 2016). This is because several paradoxical phenomena determine the daily dynamics and challenges of public strategic leaders. First, participants face the phenomenon of "shrinking time", in which they want more in less time (Rosa, 2019). Secondly, "all decisions and actions bring new uncertainties" as noted by Bauman (2000), and thirdly, more technology and knowledge do not lead to more control, but rather to an increase in feelings of uncertainty referring to Obolensky (2014).

The dominant theories appear to generate expectations based on outdated images of organisations and leadership. In this matter, reflectivity has also become a "canonical, frozen concept" which leads to socially desired behaviour among leaders and an alienating gap between the "espoused theory and the theory in practice" (Mattingly, 2019; Kerr & Todd, 2021).

We may conclude that the most problematic concept is not only reflectivity but also "leadership" in combination with "adapting" (or learning and improving) because the growing number of implicit theories puts pressure on this role and position. This leaves little space for open, meaningful reflectivity and vulnerability.

More broadly, a societal debate on leadership ideology is currently unfolding in many countries. It seems that "the more insecure the dynamics are, the more we wish for a strong leader who brings clarity on cause and effect and quick solutions", as described by Van de Calseyde et al. (2021). Within the scope of this study, theory should begin with the analysis of daily dynamics, rather than of persistently prescribing new ideologies that reinforce muteness and alienation.

Suppose we want to conclude within the frame of leadership and reflectivity. In that case, we would plead for the leaders' and others' "radical awareness of ideologies" to avoid further theoretical wishful thinking, as described by Zizek (2019). We would invite them to incorporate the uncontrollable into their discourse by sharing doubts and imperfections as sources of meaning, as noted by Rosa (2016) and Dewey (1933). Or this might also become just another pressing ideology.

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5

# Chapter 5

A humanistic exploration; Public strategic leaders under pressure, reflectivity and its social implications

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## Chapter summary

In this chapter we explore the assertion that personal and relational reflectivity is indispensable in these times of poly-crisis, conflict, and increasing contradictions for addressing wicked issues and adaptive problems. More specifically, this chapter explores the concept of reflectivity among public strategic leaders working in liquid and accelerated times. It addresses the growing urgency for leadership and reflectivity in regional and global public spheres, from a humanistic approach as a normative stance. The study shows that reflectivity, relational, and ethical values in organisations are under pressure due to a series of sociological shifts. Alongside this, there is a trend of strategic leaders in public organisations expressing a growing need for reflectivity as a personal desire. The selected methodology of this study is qualitative; a phenomenological and narrative exploration based on in-depth interviews, group dialogues, and open-ended surveys involving 31 public strategic leaders from health, government, education, and social organisations. The thick data on the actual experiences of public strategic leaders add an empirical perspective and contribution to the often-theoretical leadership debate. We conclude with three critical moments that summarise the struggles of public strategic leaders in their reflective practices in public organisations. This chapter offers practical value for leaders, coaches, and facilitators who aim to create reflective and resonant spaces within organisations.

## 5.1 Introduction and problem statement

The statement in this study is that reflectivity, which allows for a personal and relational inquiry, is indispensable in these times of poly-crisis, international and regional conflicts, and growing contradictions. Reflectivity with others is daily "under pressure due to a variety of forces", on which we will elaborate in this chapter (Van der Steen et al., 2025).

In addition, a paradoxical development is unfolding: "a growing number of public strategic leaders pointing out an increased need for reflectivity" (Van der Steen et al., 2025). Therefore, according to Van der Steen et al. (2025) current crises require "a shift in the mindset of leaders and others in public organisations." In this context, we define the concept of reflectivity as "the intrapersonal and interpersonal experience" of doubt, hesitation, or perplexity regarding "a directly experienced situation" as noted by Dewey (1933) and Van der Steen et al. (2025).

Dewey (1933) advocates for "the construction of the meaning of specifically disruptive events" as also underlined by the view of Gergen (1999), Weick (2005) and Frimann & Hersted (2016).

The study of Van der Steen et al. (2025) points out as a limitation of previous studies that they insufficiently explore how organisational pressures influence the daily practices of public strategic leaders today. This chapter fills this gap.

We conducted this exploration from a "with-ness perspective" to gain more insights into the actual experiences of public strategic leaders in practice, as opposed to the "about-ness perspective" in the theoretical leadership debate and which is often used to describe how leaders must behave, as noted by Shotter (2006).

This study responds to the repeated scholarly assertions that public strategic leaders now face increasingly complex changes and diverse adaptive challenges, compounded by a rapidly growing body of information (Raelin, 2002; Obolensky, 2014; Rosa, 2019; Haslam et al., 2020).

One of the main concerns for organisations currently is how to reflect and experience meaning in these times of poly-crisis and acceleration, dealing with problems too complex to resolve, and unpredictability as noted by Vaill (1996), Bateson (2023) and Stockdale & Jones (2024). This is further detailed by Horney et al. (2010), who, among others, describes current challenges as "VUCA referring to volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity." These scholars argue that "leaders now face increasingly complex and ambiguous situations, as well as novel problems. These problems are often referred to as 'wicked issues'" (Rittel & Webber, 1973) or adaptive challenges and, according to Heifetz (1994) and Grint (2010), "necessitate new forms of reflective practice." In this context, the general argument is that leaders in organisations must deliberately create time to think,

reflect, and discern their role (Van der Steen et al., 2025). Or in other words, to create meaning as a response to complexity, uncertainty, and accelerating pressures as noted by Horney et al. (2010), Kornelsen (2019) and Rosa (2019).

First, we introduce the conceptual framework of this study, elaborating on three pillars: a) the three pressures on reflective practices in organisations as noted by Van der Steen (2025), b) the related sociological shifts (building on various scholars, see Table 1), and c) a series of relevant humanistic values (building on various scholars, see Table 1). We then present the methodology and empirical findings, followed by a discussion and conclusion. As an overview, we share the summary of the conceptual framework in Table 1.

**Table 1**. Conceptual framework: pressures on reflectivity, sociological shifts, and humanistic values

| | Pressures on reflectivity | Sociological shifts | Humanistic values |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | The pressure of demanding expectations focused on individual leaders | The breakdown of traditional institutions and the separation of power from politics, where global business interests prevail (Bauman, 2000). A transfer of risks from institutions to individuals (Bauman, 2000; Rosa, 2019) | The value of human dignity and the aim to create conditions for human flourishing, including empathy and meaningful relations (Von Kimakowitz et al., 2010; Melé, 2016). |
| 2. | The accelerated pace of new information and demand for quick fixes in problem-solving | A shift from long-term planning to quick fixes (Bauman, 2000; Rosa, 2019) which is accompanied by the acceleration of fact-based and fake information, driven by technology and focus on economic growth (Rosa, 2019; Stockdale & Jones, 2024). Moreover, a relentless pursuit of growth and control further contributes to alienation (Lijster & Celikates, 2019). | The value of ethical reflectivity and stimulating ethical dialogue with others (Von Kimakowitz et al., 2010), the process of co-authoring, and the construction of the meaning (Gergen, 1999; Weick, 2005; Frimann & Hersted, 2016). |
| 3. | Vulnerability due to visibility and the risk of transgressive reactions | The erosion of social safety nets and deregulation (Bauman, 2000) and economic, social, and technological transformations heightened the visibility and increased stakeholder multiplicity and ethical complexities (Van der Wal, 2017; Noordegraaf, 2000, 2007) | Value of attention for all stakeholders, aiming for responsible action (Von Kimakowitz et al., 2010), with attention for meaning, the experience of purpose (Melé, 2016), ethical accountability (Arendt, 2003), and the role of emotions in moral judgment (Nussbaum, 2011). Prioritising the needs of the others over self-interest through vulnerability and open dialogue (Levinas, in: Hummels & Nullens, 2022; Han, 2023). |

## 5.2 Pressures on reflectivity in organisations and sociological shifts

The first pillar of the conceptual framework is based on the insights gained from the study by Van der Steen et al. (2025). In general, they have demonstrated that public strategic leaders often become bound by a scripted, ritualised ideology of reflectivity. They found a pattern of avoidance of disruptive reflectivity by a variety of daily pressing pressures that inhibit genuine reflective practice. In this paragraph, we describe these pressures on reflectivity in organisations, influenced by a series of sociological developments.

*I. Pressure of demanding expectations focused on individual leaders*

First, Van der Steen et al. (2025) found a pressure to meet demanding expectations focused on individual leaders. This pressure arises in the context of "liquid modernity," as described by Bauman (2000). This term highlights "the breakdown of traditional institutions and the separation of power from politics, where global business interests prevail" (Bauman, 2000). Additionally, a "transfer of risks from institutions to individuals" influences the mindset of both leaders and followers (Bauman, 2000; Rosa, 2019). Van der Steen et al. (2025) confirm in their study that "dominant leadership theories impose expectations. These expectations are based on outdated representations and underline contradicting ideologies, including both decisive and reflective leadership."

The contradictory pressure to be decisive and reflective has led to socially desired behaviours that create a disconnect between what is preached and what is practiced, building on Rosa (2016), Kerr & Todd (2021) in Van der Steen et al. (2025).

Van der Steen et al. (2025) further contend that this pressure, inherent in the concept of leadership itself, induces an "instrumental interpretation or a reflective approach as a tool for decision-making, leaving little room for vulnerability"

*II. Pressure of an accelerated pace of new information and demand for quick fixes in problem-solving*

Second, Van der Steen et al. (2025) found that "the pressure of an accelerated pace of new information and demand for quick fixes in problem-solving is a significant concern." This pressure is mainly related to the concept of acceleration and the focus on economic growth (Rosa, 2016, 2019). In this context, Bauman (2000) describes a shift, in his analysis of current sociological changes, from "long-term planning to quick fixes." A growing number of studies highlight that the digital age overloads leaders with continuous new fact-based and fake information, leaving little time for thoughtful reflectivity and learning (Raelin, 2002; Amulya, 2004; Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008; Rosa, 2019; Stockdale & Jones, 2024). Van der Steen et al. (2025) conclude that public strategic leaders generally experience daily, accelerated pressure, with a strong focus on problem-solving.

In this light, Rosa (2019) explains that the "shrinking of time", a push to achieve more in less time, undermines the capacity to form meaningful relationships and engage deeply with one's environment. He explains in this view how a "relentless pursuit of growth and control further contributes to this alienation" (Lijster & Celikates, 2019).

*III. Pressure of vulnerability, due to visibility and the risk of transgressive reactions*

Third, Van der Steen et al. (2025) identified a pressure of "vulnerability due to visibility and the risk of transgressive reactions." This pressure stems from the "erosion of social safety nets and deregulation" (Bauman, 2000). Furthermore, economic, social, and technological transformations heighten visibility, stakeholder multiplicity, and ethical complexities, as described by Van der Wal (2017) and Noordegraaf (2000, 2007). This also implies the earlier-mentioned transfer of risks from institutions to individuals, referring to Bauman (2000).

Van der Steen et al. (2025) illustrate how public strategic leaders interpret their role as individuals who react to the interpretations of "them" or "others," revealing a pervasive sense of pressure and vulnerability in their position without an open or genuine dialogue. Therefore, leaders come forward as the "primary decision-making cockpit" (Twist & Frissen, 2024). In this light, Vosman and Niemeijer (2017) argue that leaders experience "dehumanisation" due to a limited "expiry date" regarding their future position, which is characterised by "lingering insecurity about one's labour, income, and status" (Marchart, 2013). Recent studies show that the threat towards public leaders is increasing, specifically in a public political context (I&O Research, 2023).

## 5.3 The humanistic approach as normative stance

To explore the meaning and effects of these pressures and sociological shifts, we adopt a humanistic approach as a normative stance, resulting in the third pillar of the conceptual framework.

In general, the humanistic approach aims to build humane societies where all individuals can lead meaningful lives, as formulated by the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht (2025). This approach challenges the neoliberal concept of the "Homo economicus", which tends to overlook the inherently relational dimensions of human existence, as noted by Gergen (2009); Sayer (2011) and Huijser & Nullens (2024).

In this view, Nullens and Van Nes (2021) argue for conceptualising the human person as "Homo amans",[10] driven by an "innate need for profound relationships and meaning" (Nullens & Van Nes, 2021; Huijser & Nullens, 2024). Dignity is a general principle of

10 "Homo amans" translates to "loving man," or "one who loves" in Latin. It is a term used to describe humans, not just in a biological sense (like Homo Sapiens), but also in terms of their capacity for love, care, and connection (Nullens, 2021).

humanity, rooted in global spiritual and religious traditions, underlined by Pirson (2017) and Huijser & Nullens (2024).

To relate to the humanistic philosophy, we elaborate on a series of specific humanistic values related to the mentioned pressures and sociological changes, as the third pillar of the conceptual framework in this study.

First, considering the pressure of demanding expectations focused on individual leaders, we incorporate the value of "human dignity" and the aim of "creating conditions for human flourishing," including empathy and meaningful relationships, into the conceptual framework, drawing on Von Kimakowitz et al. (2010) and Melé (2016).

Secondly, considering the pressure of an accelerated pace of new information and demand for quick fixes in problem-solving, we underline the value of "ethical reflectivity" and stimulating ethical dialogue with others, as noted by Von Kimakowitz et al. (2010). This builds on the value of co-authoring and co-construction of meaning, as underlined by Gergen (1999), Weick (2005), and Frimann and Hersted (2016).

Thirdly, given the pressure of vulnerability from high visibility and the risk of transgressive reactions, the value of striving for responsible action stands out. This means "focusing on the common good for all stakeholders, with attention to societal meaning and purpose", as noted by Melé (2016).

In this line of thought, we also mention Arendt (2003), who emphasises self-revelation and "ethical accountability." We also draw on Nussbaum's (2011) perspective, highlighting "the centrality of emotions in moral judgment and their contribution to broader social justice and ethical responsibility."

Building on this, Hummels and Nullens (2022) propose an "agapeic turn," with a focus on love and wellbeing in work and organising. They draw inspiration from Levinas (Hummels & Nullens, 2022), who emphasises "the ethical imperative of prioritising the needs of the 'Other' over self-interest through vulnerability and open dialogue."

The primary question we explore is: Considering the dominant pressures public strategic leaders face, what are the social implications for the reflective practices of public strategic leaders considering the mentioned humanistic values? What does it mean for the mindset of strategic leaders and others in public organisations?

## 5.4 Methodology

We conducted a qualitative study, specifically a phenomenological and narrative exploration of the experiences and narratives of public strategic leaders. In line with Ritchie et al. (2003) and Rhodes and Noordegraaf (2007), we contend that qualitative methods, mainly

narrative investigations, offer a deep insight into the behaviours and motivations of top-level public leaders. We conducted thirteen in-depth interviews and analysed these rich lived experiences using the phenomenological method of close and open reading of Dahlberg et al. (2008).

In the next phase, we enriched our study by engaging twelve additional public strategic leaders through group dialogues and open surveys. Twenty-five leaders' narratives were explored inductively, incorporating Mattingly's (2019) perspective on "frozen concepts." Our sample included sixteen men and nine women from public organisations spanning health (seven), government (nine), education (six) and social organisations (three).

The qualitative survey captured more personal insights, helping to mitigate social desirability and group thinking.

In the final phase, an extra group dialogue was held with six additional new strategic public leaders (three men and three women) from health, government infrastructure, and education sectors. This focus group, conducted within the context of the "Reflective Chamber", a space for directors to discern and create meaning in volatile environments, explored the pressures affecting reflective practice.

The open and qualitative exploration yielded rich data comprising lived experiences and narratives. We then analysed all the thick data using a mixed qualitative method that combined narrative and phenomenological approaches to select and extract the most revealing interpretations based on inductive and interpretative analyses.

Ultimately, we employed ChatGPT (o3-mini) to verify our data analysis, resulting in a stronger connection between the narratives and humanistic values. The final interpretations and conceptualisations were conducted and double-checked by the researchers. ChatGPT was used as a supplementary analytic support tool and did not replace researcher analysis.

We share an overview of the samples and methods in Table 2.

**Table 2**. Samples and methods in three phases

| Selected sample | Phenomenological methods | Narrative methods |
|---|---|---|
| First sample: 13 participants | In-depth interviews, e-mails, and observations | |
| Second sample: 12 participants | | Group dialogue 1 and open survey |
| Third sample: 6 participants | Group dialogue 2 and observations (this study) | Group dialogue 2 (this study) |
| In total: 31 participants | | |

## 5.5 The qualitative exploration among public strategic leaders

Considering the three dominant pressures, we explored a series of questions in the second group dialogue: How do public strategic leaders interpret the pressures and their implications? What do their interpretations reveal, considering the humanistic perspective? We share a selection of the most profound narratives and phenomena that emerged.

### I. Thick data on the pressure of demanding expectations focused on individual leaders

The experiences related to the demanding expectations focused on individual leaders revealed several phenomena. In general, the participants shared that they experience conflicting expectations; not only do they face expectations to deliver results, but they also feel that they must be open, structured, and accountable in their reflective practices.

*a. Data concerning pressure of demanding expectations focused on individual leaders:*

Within this matter, Participant A started to explain:

> *"When the process in the meeting does not run smoothly, there is a quick call to the chairman or leader. People expect you to take the lead." Later on, this participant reflected on another aspect of her position as a leader, "When I choose to reverse decisions after a reflective moment, I have experienced that people often wonder if you are a good leader."*

Participant B added on to this, stating:

> *"If I do not organise it, it will not happen; it is a role. As a director, you must dwell on the structure of reflective practices."*

In this light, participant C added a long-term perspective:

> *"You must embody it as a role-model to create a reflective culture; it takes time."*

These quotes underscore how these interpretations seduce public strategic leaders into being constantly "on," ready to step in immediately to restore order, even if it means sacrificing a reflective dialogue.

*b. Data concerning a periodical routine of reflective practices:*

Furthermore, most participants reported having a periodic routine for planning reflective practices, often triggered by an audit or regular meeting, as outlined in their annual plans.

Participant F:

> *"In my former job, looking into each other's work was common. The project directors took feedback from another team. You will improve as a team and an organisation if you create such an atmosphere."*

And participant G:

> *"In our board of three, we reflect quite a lot. I have been doing it for 25 years, following the lesson I was once taught: "We have to make each other stronger." If that is not the case, then it is better to quit, so to speak. We have no problems with the time constraints; it gets scheduled!"*

Participant B added:

> *"Furthermore, I consider the moments with an external audit or supervisory board a great occasion. I consider them partners. Moreover, when they start pushing with hard power, I will turn that into more personal human reflections. Reflecting is then searching together. Inspection is also accountability."*

*c. Data concerning spontaneous and reactive reflective moments:*

Next, they have expectations towards themselves and others regarding relational reflective practices, underlining the value of "strong relations." Several examples were shared concerning the participants' *spontaneous* and *reactive* reflective moments in their practices.

For example, Participant D illustrates his practices:

> *"I weekly organise a morning with my team. I start the first hour with attention for the question, 'How are you doing now?'"*

Participant B illustrated her practice of spontaneous, reactive reflectivity with an example. She described:

> *"I just started a new job in this organisation, and the first month was complicated. I did not feel very welcome. So, I then brought that into a joint meeting with the board of directors to share what that does to me and its overall impact. That opens others up as well. And that is also often uncomfortable."*

Participant F added to this theme, wondering,

> *"How could we bring reflectivity more to the primary process, since people cannot reflect against their will? How can we connect to the primary work process? May it also be an instruction to reflect?"*

## II. Thick data on the pressure of the accelerated pace of new information and quick fixes

The theme of reflecting beyond the fast pace and "quick fix" attitude emerged as relevant from contradicting experiences. We found several phenomena related to this theme in the experiences.

*a. Data concerning slowing down and enduring the delaying effect of reflective moments:*

The first theme in the lived experiences concerned slowing down and enduring the delaying effect of reflective moments. Participant A stated, for example:

> *"I experience that the need to reflect becomes greater as the pace of work quickens. Due to technological advancements, the volume of mail and the amount of information being shared have increased, necessitating action. So that pressure is great. Standing still now feels as much more necessary than twenty years ago."*

This quote captures a paradox: while the faster pace demands more reflectivity (to avoid rash decisions), it simultaneously leaves less time for it. Later, she stated:

> *"In the rush of the day, with a full agenda in the meeting, if someone asks reflectively, 'What is going on here?' then I do not always have the patience for it. I know exploring this question could create precious moments. However, I often do not have the headspace or time. I also want to be finished by 1 p.m, the time pressure can backfire. You also want to complete the agenda and make decisions; you are sitting together for a reason. However, I know it often comes back like a boomerang." Later in the dialogue, she explained:*
>
> *"It is always the same person who asks the question; then it is not reflectivity but a possible sabotage. What makes us think is that we must go on."*

Participant B reacted:

> *"Isn't that exactly the moment to reflect on?"*

Participant A initially interprets her role as productive in the decision-making process. In contrast, participant B describes her reflective role as her default stance in any work process. In this matter, participant F stated:

> *"The tricky thing about reflectivity is that it does not just arise; it also has a delaying effect. I view reflectivity as a natural desire, but due to its hectic nature and complexity, it often gets pushed to the background. So, you must organise it yourself in these accelerated times."*

This emphasises the challenge: without deliberate structuring, reflectivity will be sidelined by the constant need to act quickly.

*b. Data concerning the transition from action and problem-solving to reflectivity:*

Another phenomenon observed in the experiences related to the solution-oriented context was the transition from action to reflectivity. For example, Participant F states:

> *"That switch from firefighting to reflectivity takes a lot of effort in practice!"*

Participant E confirmed:

> *"I find switching from 'action' to 'reflectivity' easier when it is planned because then you sit down for it, and you are set up for it."*

Participant G stated:

> *"When my schedule leaves some space, spontaneous reflectivity arises, but when it fills up, you lose it. Then you already have to organise it and make sure you have space in your calendar."*

The participants underlined the high cost of transitioning from "firefighting" to reflective thinking. Some approach this as a problem and a complexity, whereas others, as we mentioned before, consider this awareness to be the core of their role and job.

*c. Data concerning reflecting on shared meaning:*

Another phenomenon in the fast-paced contexts of schools and hospitals is reflectivity in the form of sharing meaning and stories about the purpose and value of their work and organisation. Participant D expressed:

> *"You have that in healthcare and education, people work with a purpose. They work from an essence, and they want to matter, but you also have to reflect on that. To what extent do you still matter, both for the work and for yourself?"*

Only one participant mentions this theme, which is notable, given the theories of sense-making and the development of shared meaning.

*d. Data concerning reflectivity as evaluation with methods:*

The examples generally show that reflective practices serve various aims. Among these, we identified a specific objective: using reflectivity as evaluation, which utilises multiple methods, as illustrated by a series of examples. Participant G described, for example:

> *"We have quarterly evaluations with every team. We, as directors, attend those once or twice a year. We call that self-evaluation. We have some frameworks that they must meet. Then we discuss 'Is it going well?' or 'Is it not going well?'"*

And,

> *"What also works very well is the form of Moral Deliberation (Moreel Beraad) when we have complicated cases that we cannot resolve. We do that when it is tricky, for example, with ethical issues, but when one says, 'Let us turn left,' and another wants to go to the right. Then we explore 'What is the right thing to do here?'"*

Concerning quality improvement as reflective practice, participant A shares:

> *"We are very active now when it comes to reflecting. This also concerns the Care Sector Quality Compass, which strongly encourages reflectivity. Not just through facts, figures, and measurements, but also through stories, because that encourages reflectivity much more than cold numbers. Stories provide soil for reflectivity. Next, we conclude what we can learn from them and identify areas for improvement."*

Here, we also see that this participant refers to the theme of co-authoring as "a shared language" directly linked to creating shared meaning.

**III. Thick data on the pressure of vulnerability, due to visibility**

The theme of 'precariousness, vulnerability, and the risk of uneasy interactions' comes forward as relevant, with contrasting experiences. We found several phenomena related to this theme in the experiences.

*a. Data concerning reflectivity with an inequality in power in the relationship*

First, the theme of inequality in power within the relationship arose. Participant D started, explaining:

> *"Inequality in power in a relationship makes reciprocity difficult. If practitioners are open to this, this can lead to good reflection. It becomes reciprocal only when people are open to it. Maybe establishing clear 'game rules' will help to make it more explicit how to make it work."*

Participant C added:

> *"I am not so bothered by hierarchy differences. However, I am very aware of them. For the other person, you are a director. When I notice that, I very consciously sit back longer and express myself by 'self-unpeeling,' sharing how I experience the process. That is often very helpful."*

Participant B stated in this dialogue,

> *"The moment a superior takes over the conversation, I say, 'fine, I have heard this, but I think it is important for everyone to speak up. I am aware of those patterns.'"*

Participant E described how he tried to open up reflectivity:

> *"I did once suggest in a team to submit something to two other colleagues to explore what they thought about it, just to let them have a look. That was perceived as a vote of no confidence. I even got a letter about it and the OR got involved."*

*b. Data concerning reflectivity leading to uneasiness and discomfort*

In his following example, he illustrates the obstacle of people "getting upset" with his decision to let an issue go it go in the management team:

> *"I wanted to hold management team meetings every other week with no set agenda, just to explore 'what keeps you busy' and 'what do you want to discuss.' Everyone got upset. So, I do that only at the board level now."*

In this example, he is avoiding a feeling of precariousness and discomfort by withdrawing and selecting an alternative arena with his peers. Furthermore, his attempt to invite reflectivity was interpreted negatively, illustrating how reflective practices can be perceived and lead to conflict. This experience also reveals a moment of distrust that he experienced. Participant G stated:

> *"When it is not in the genes of the organisation, it becomes very complex. Then people think, 'Oh my, soon I will have to make myself vulnerable, and people in power will judge me.' It surely comes down to social safety. I wonder, does more reflective skill lead to more safety?"*

With Participant B adding:

> *"I am used to opening up with vulnerability. If you state, 'I have trouble with this or that,' and then personally relate, it invites better reflectivity from others."*

Other participants explain how, in their experience:

> *"Fear is a poor counsellor. One feeds safety precisely by reflecting."*

Participant B acknowledges the sometimes-uncomfortable process of people getting used to her reflective interventions:

> *"The other day, we had a crisis at the location. I opened up, 'what is going on in here? Are you afraid, or do you feel guilty?' And I do reflect openly about myself, which is very enriching. People must get used to me because I also name the patterns in the conversation."*

When reflectivity is not embraced, the participants demonstrate different approaches. Some withdraw due to discomfort and confrontational reactions, while others engage by taking more risks and allowing "others" to adjust to them.

*c. Data concerning spontaneous reflectivity in the primary process*

Several times, the theme of *spontaneous* reflectivity arose several times during the exploration of the primary process. For example, participant F expressed his struggle with how to stimulate others to reflect:

*"The reflective conversation is good to do with directors, management and staff, but landing that in the primary process is much harder. My teams are primarily focused on 'fixing' and 'acting.' 'Thou shalt reflect' does not work so well. If it comes from above, it is another top-down assignment, another instruction or box on their long checklist."*

Participant F adds,

*"I can only deploy myself and not order this. Good reflectivity comes from strong relationships."*

Participant G continued this theme, wondering how spontaneous reflectivity could be created,

*"So, spontaneous reflectivity, I would find that interesting because then the question arises: 'how do you create a climate where that happens?' A climate in which people say, 'hey, let us reflect on that.' I do not know how you experience it, but the employees mainly want to complete the list of tasks."*

Participant D explains his view on this:

*"Maintaining reflective skills in periodically planned moments helps to reflect more spontaneously in the moment. An occasional offsite works when you get away from it or have a drink. Nevertheless, it is something to be forced to dwell on."*

The participants' different use of language is relevant. Some search for ways to "organise" and "create" a reflective "climate," whereas others use language about "opening up" as a mindset and approach in their behaviour.

*d. Data concerning visible incidents leading to an initiative to reflect together*

Furthermore, the dialogue mentioned that more visible incidents often lead to an initiative to reflect together. For example, participant G shared how, in their practice,

*"The more complex, the calmer. When we have an incident, such as, for example, the suspicion of mutilation of a patient, then within 2 or 3 days, we sit down and introduce someone very good at asking questions."*

This implies that the significant, visible complexities are more straightforward to address and reflect upon than the minor, relational complexities beneath the surface, as seen in the following experience of Participant F:

*"The quality of decisions sometimes becomes less. For example, when people are physically present but checked out. Sometimes, you also want to know what is happening; otherwise, you will not make decisions."*

The more explicitly complex the issue, the easier it is to create a moment to reflect, and the more invisible the underlying issue, the harder it is to create space for reflectivity.

*e. Data concerning reflectivity evoked by emotions or doubts*

Lastly, the participants described how their emotions and doubts led to either reflectivity alone or with others, using metaphors such as "gut feeling" or "stop button." Participant A shared, for example:

> *"I regularly have a gut feeling. Normally I think too much, but in these intuitive moments I say to myself, 'screw it,' slow down and start sensing!"*

With participant C adding, "That is a moment when I want to call someone, who is very variable."

## 5.5 In summary, paradoxical findings: Humanistic values under pressure

The participants generally share conflicting interpretations of how to position themselves regarding the variety of expectations, some more persistent, others more hesitant. They all underscore the value of profound, meaningful relationships, and "opening up" with vulnerability.

The findings show that awareness of the pressures and conflicting mindsets is growing among public strategic leaders. They reflected on these phenomena during the focus group and asked each other reflective questions. Present turbulent times are stimulating awareness of relational and ethical issues and heightening the need for reflective exchanges. Most participants mentioned various examples of personal reflective questions and their regular reflective practices, such as self-evaluation and moral inquiry, concerning ethics in times of war, climate crises, and human rights and concrete behaviours such as me-too-issues, inclusion, and social safety, both for employees and political leaders.

The findings confirm and illustrate how the participants claim to operate under significant pressures of high expectations, accelerated problem-solving demands, and persistent precariousness. The findings reveal that they operate in a complex environment where they must continually balance their actions. Within this balancing act, the three dominant pressures appear to lead to reflective practices that are more regulated and planned, rather than spontaneous, relational, and existential.

## 5.6 Discussion and conclusion

The primary question explored in this study was: Considering the dominant pressures public strategic leaders face, what are the social implications related to their reflective practices, considering the humanistic values? What does it mean for the mindset of public strategic leaders and others in organisations?

A notable phenomenon in this study is the observation that the earlier mentioned humanistic values are increasingly challenged within the context of public strategic leadership. Participants report a growing need for reflectivity, while simultaneously describing the environment in which they operate as subject to sustained pressure. Across the accounts, shared experiences point to increasing constraints on:

- The expression of human dignity, empathy, and meaningful relationships; confirming the view of Von Kimakowitz et al. (2010) and Melé (2016).
- Opportunities for ethical reflectivity and the facilitation of ethical dialogue ín the work processes, confirming the view of Von Kimakowitz et al. (2010).
- The open dialogue on responsible action, ethical accountability, and the consideration of emotions in moral judgement, confirming the view of Arendt (2003) and Nussbaum (2011).

The overall theme comes across as "relational vulnerability" and the sense of "taking a risk" when "acting reflective" in the environment of public organisations. Arendt (1998) elaborates on this idea, arguing that acting is always a risky activity: "once set in the world, an act cannot be undone." According to Arendt (1998), acting is always relational: "we do it 'in the midst' of others who also act." This raises the question of how to approach moments of pressure and vulnerability, specifically during spontaneous reflective moments ín the interaction with others.

After clustering the narratives and phenomena, three critical moments emerged in the data analysis. McNamee (2004) defines these critical moments as potential transformations, referring to relational moments which alert us to flexibility. These moments determine the flow of the rest of the conversation or interaction (McNamee, 2004). Following this view, public strategic leaders need a heightened alertness in these critical moments, to decide whether to act or reflect, either internally or with others.

This definition underscores the participants' struggles, which stem from their reflective flexibility, process skills, and creativity in interventions during these critical moments, following the view of Goedhart & Van der Steen (2016) underlining a processual mindset in today's context. The participants expressed doubts, questioning whether to react spontaneously in the moment, to reflect, question, decide, argue, or to postpone such actions for another planned moment. We elaborate on the critical moments found in this study concerning reflectivity.

- *Critical moments concerning double expectations: reflective versus decisive*

In this study, the participants experience the expectation to embody both idealised reflective qualities such as doubt and contemplation, and decisiveness during their interactions with others. This leads to concrete moments of discomfort arising from contradictory expectations. Moreover, as the narratives illustrate, there exists a tension between being a "proactive initiator of reflectivity" and "the risk that reflective actions will be interpreted as indecisiveness." This requires a mindset that acknowledges and endures the double expectations and interpretations of "others." These moments should not be approached as tasks to complete, but as a crucial phenomenon to reflect on, communicate about, and act upon in the view of Goedhart & Van der Steen (2016). A specific situation are the moments involving pressure to respond directly. The participants share how they feel vulnerable and experience tension in these moments. Some participants perceive unwillingness and critical reactions from others as disruptive or sabotaging, while others view them as opportunities to prompt reflectivity. Moreover, they experience an unpredictable environment where taking a risk leads to personal vulnerability and discomfort. The participants demonstrate that different interpretations lead to different responses and interventions. In their interpretation, this critical moment challenges them to respond reflectively, preferably in a nuanced, neutral way that includes all stakeholders. In the view of McNamee (2004) this alertness is crucial for "ensuring profound interactions and outcomes."

- *Critical moments of power dynamics and mutual vulnerability*

The participants emphasise their attention to the so-called "power-dynamics" in their interactions with others. They describe the patterns in which, in their position as leaders, they are constantly "put on the spot" to take the lead and speak, also in dialogue and open reflective moments. It challenges the participants to consider multiple positions in their interactions with others, especially under pressure, such as asking questions, listening, or just allowing reflective silence, following Goedhart & Van der Steen (2016). For both leaders and followers, this vulnerability and precariousness are heightened by "the pursuit of reciprocity, the emphasis on social safety, and the fear of vulnerability in contexts with power differences" (Larsson and Meier, 2023). From this perspective, Larsson and Meier (2023) argue that power dynamics are not merely a reflection of organisational hierarchy but are constantly "enacted and reinforced through subtle communicative behaviours. They point out that awareness of power dynamics in communication, such as "interrupting, dominating the conversation, or speaking more frequently, may reproduce asymmetrical power relations and limit others' contributions. Above all, it fosters feelings of mutual vulnerability. They recommend that leaders practice active listening and deliberately create space for others to express their perspectives (Larsson & Meier, 2023). Most participants in this study mentioned coaches and specially trained facilitators who regularly guide them in these concrete critical moments. In this light, Ciulla (2004) explicitly highlights the

complexities and vulnerabilities inherent in leadership interactions. She adds that leadership is inherently ethical because it involves influencing others (Ciulla, 2004). She underlines the mutual vulnerability, explaining that both parties feel "brittle in the face of disappointment or manipulation" (Ciulla, 2004). She also pays attention to followers, arguing that they have "ethical responsibilities, especially in choosing whom to follow and how they respond to leadership." She explicitly emphasises the moral responsibility in line with the humanistic values.

- *Critical moments concerning the transition from acceleration to reflectivity*

The participants share the challenge of enduring in their words "delayed effects" due to spontaneous reflectivity under the pressure of fast-paced daily work. "Switching from action to reflectivity in the interaction" is one of the most often cited struggles they report. On the other hand, increased acceleration intensifies "the need for reflectivity and the effort required to transition from quick problem-solving to reflectivity", according to the participants. They note that "reflectivity tends to be sidelined as the pace of work quickens", particularly in hectic environments such as schools or hospitals. This creates a paradox: the faster the pace, the greater the need for reflectivity. The study of Konishi et al. (2022) underscores the complexity of this critical moment. They underline "the complex process of shifting between introspective and action-oriented mental states" (Konishi et al., 2022). Above this, they highlight the "neural and cognitive challenges involved in such transitions" (Konishi et al., 2022). The study indeed demonstrates that switching between internally oriented (e.g., reflective, self-referential) and externally oriented (e.g., goal-directed, task-based) cognition is cognitively demanding. This switch takes more time and effort than switching between tasks within the same domain. Because these systems tend to suppress each other, shifting between them involves a sort of neural "change in gear," not a seamless transition (Konishi et al., 2022). Konishi et al. (2022) plead for "transition-time" and the training of cognitive flexibility. This study builds on that, underlining the importance of both training and maintaining reflective skills through planned, periodical reflective sessions and practicing and training spontaneously in the moment.

We share a summary of the critical moments, the phenomenon in the data, its social implications and the required mindset in Table 3.

**Table 3**. Summary: Critical moments, phenomena, their social implications and the shift in mindset

| Critical Moment | Phenomenon and its social implication | Required mindset |
|---|---|---|
| Critical moments concerning double expectations; reflective versus decisive | Public strategic leaders experience concrete moments of double expectations: the tension between being a proactive initiator of reflectivity opposed to the risk that reflective actions will be interpreted as indecisiveness (and weak leadership). The participants generally experience that they work under pressure to respond quickly, preferably in a nuanced and neutral approach, including all stakeholders. | Mindset to acknowledge and endure the multiple expectations and interpretations of others; not as an assignment, but as a phenomenon to reflect on.<br>The awareness to consider multiple perspectives when under pressure.<br>Building on McNamee (2004) and Goedhart & Van der Steen (2016). |
| Critical moments of power dynamics and mutual vulnerability | The participants emphasise their attention for the so-called power-dynamics in their interactions with others. They describe that in their position as a leader they are constantly "put on the spot" to take the lead and speak, also in dialogue and open reflective moments. Mutual precariousness: both parties are vulnerable to disappointment or manipulation. This is heightened by the pursuit of reciprocity, the emphasis on social safety, and the fear of vulnerability due to power differences. | It is challenging to consider multiple positions in the interactions with others, especially when under pressure, as is the case when asking questions or just allow for reflective silence. The awareness to acknowledge the patterns through subtle communicative behaviours. Practicing active listening and deliberately creating space for others as an ethical and moral responsibility. Building on Ciulla (2004), Goedhart & Van der Steen (2016) and Larsson & Meier (2023). |
| Critical moments concerning the transition from acceleration to reflectivity | The participants share the challenge of enduring the delaying effects of spontaneous reflectivity under the accelerated pressure in the fast-paced daily practices. Switching from problem-solving to reflectivity is primarily a struggle in their interactions. Reflectivity tends to be sidelined as the pace of work quickens. This creates a paradox: the faster the pace, the greater the need for reflectivity. | The mindset to endure discomfort and unease. The awareness to acknowledge the delay in switching between neural networks.<br>Including "transition-time" by planning reflective moments, training of cognitive flexibility, and maintenance of reflective skills by periodical reflective sessions and exercises.<br>Building on Konishi et al. (2022). |

Considering the conceptual framework (Table 1), we conclude that the mentioned sociological shifts and pressures offer a relevant starting point. The participants confirmed the pressures. They underlined the shifts, the pressures on the mentioned humanistic values, and shared explicitly related critical moments.

In line with the humanistic values mentioned by Von Kimakowitz et al. (2010) and Melé (2016), we conclude that creating conditions for human flourishing requires explicit attention to enduring discomfort and awareness of the pressures and critical moments as described by McNamee, 2004. Most participants demonstrate they are experiencing a shift, with two dominant mindsets currently competing for priority. On the one hand, the persistent claim to be a strong leader and to deliver economic growth and on the other hand, the wish to show a heightened awareness in uneasy moments.

Considering the instrumental approach of reflectivity, the participants demonstrate how periodic evaluative moments guide their reflective practices within a structured framework and agenda. As Cooper (1992) underlines, reflection in this sense often means a) stepping back, abstracting, modelling and monitoring, b) replacing lived practices by representations (plans, strategies, indicators) where c) control is exercised at a distance, through these abstractions. Therefore, a crucial meta-question arises as underscored by Hernes (2014) and Goedhart & Van der Steen, (2016): Are reflective practices approached as a utilitarian "project" with goals, tasks, and rationality?

Considering the practical implications for reflective practices in organisations, we wonder: How do public strategic leaders and others reflect on this in their organisations? Does this create an extra critical moment to be alert to? Within this regard, Le Cunff (2025) argues, "By shifting from linear goals to a more organic, process-oriented approach, we should better navigate the challenges of modern life."

We conclude by stating that reflective practices offer time and space to connect the minds that contradict each other, often in a meta-perspective, exploring questions such as: How can public strategic leaders balance (seemingly) opposing values in the context of acceleration and complexities through reflective practices? How can they find a way to do justice to the tension between various values?

Based on this, we formulate a series of hypothetical questions that are intertwined with the reflective act to balance and do justice to conflicting values. First, as said, reflective "acting" involves "taking a risk" as noted by Arendt (2003). Public strategic leaders (and others) who endure relational discomfort and are willing to take this risk in their encounters appear to facilitate "resonant spaces", inviting others to "open up" and engage in meaningful explorations when something is at stake, building on Rosa (2019).

As Rosa states (2019), "It is only in the uncontrollable that we experience meaning." He refers to the experience of "resonance as the answer to the growing alienation due to the constant striving for modernistic control and predictability" (Lijster & Celikates, 2019). He defines resonance as "a form of world-relation, in which subject and world meet and transform each other." With the concept of resonance, Rosa (2016) provides a foundation for fostering a "more profound and meaningful rapport within communities" where

reflective practices can find a safe space and the members of the community can "create and experience meaning" (Rosa, 2023).

Furthermore, balancing and doing justice to contradicting values requires an awareness of the "ideological paradoxical dynamic" attached to the concept of reflectivity (Zizek, 2019). In this matter, Zizek (2019) argues that reflectivity is "never neutral but is always imbued with ideologies that shape what is considered right or wrong." Even when leaders, for example, promote vulnerability and dialogue, they might inadvertently "legitimise the current order and reinforce their position" (Zizek, 2019). For instance, when Participant E structures reflectivity to control the process, it could "reaffirm existing power relations", as Zizek (2019) warns against. Therefore, reflectivity is not merely an individual exercise but also "a political act", as Arendt also underlines (2003). It can challenge the existing order or, conversely, reinforce it (Zizek, 2019).

Within this regard, Serres (2013) describes a pattern resulting from the dominance of MBA language, in which management, whether consciously or unconsciously, "smothers new ideas through reflective rituals and language, taught in MBA programs". Serres (2013) approaches this phenomenon as "co-optation,", produced by "the social reality present in power structures." This view of Zizek (2019), Arendt (2003) and Serres (2013) encourages looking beyond the superficial, seemingly open, and reflective practices and critically examining the mechanisms behind them. Further research should explore these hypothetical challenges in practice in organisations.

In general, we conclude that the findings advocate for reflective and resonant spaces that nurture ethics and vulnerability as a counterbalance to the alienating pace and uncertainties of current sociological shifts. We hope this chapter contributes to this, providing a reflective and resonant space to contemplate the current turbulent times, highlighting the importance of reflective flexibility, particularly during critical moments. The art of listening, exploring, and considering meta-perspectives, as well as connecting opposing values, emerges as indispensable. It challenges public strategic leaders and their colleagues to courageously take risks when relational and ethical issues are at stake.

A limitation of this study is the relatively small and context-specific sample of public strategic leaders. As the findings are rooted in a particular organisational culture, they may not be directly generalisable to other contexts without further comparative research. By exploring reflectivity through interviews and group dialogues outside the direct work environment, this approach assumes that such reflective practices can be fully understood without being embedded in the actual context. Future research could benefit from studying reflective practices as they unfold within daily organisational life, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their relational and contextual dynamics. It would be essential to verify the conclusions in another large-scale study among a broader sample of leaders, such as middle managers and leaders in communities or profit organisations.

The contribution of this study lies in its exploration of the lived experiences of public strategic leaders navigating accelerated and complex contexts. While much of the existing leadership literature remains conceptual or prescriptive, this study offers grounded insights into the reflective practices of public strategic leaders facing real-time dilemmas.

By adopting a humanistic approach, the study shifts the focus from reflectivity as a managerial tool to reflectivity as a relational and ethical act, one that emerges in moments of discomfort, uncertainty, and mutual vulnerability. It introduces the notion of critical moments as concrete instances where public strategic leaders must decide whether to act, pause, or invite dialogue.

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6

# Chapter 6

Discussion and conclusion

## 6.1 Overviewing and interpreting the outcomes

We initiated this study with the primary concern that time to reflect and think is under pressure in the context of public strategic leadership (Raelin, 2002; Rosa, 2016). A limitation in the existing literature so far has been the absence of explorations into the more profound meaning of reflectivity for public strategic leaders in practice (Van der Steen et al., 2021). In this dissertation, we fill this gap by exploring the experiences of public strategic leaders in their current context and the value they attribute to reflective practices.

In this light, the thesis of this dissertation is that public strategic leaders in present times need to create time to think and reflect on their mindset and role, thereby creating meaning for themselves and others. Based on the thesis, the central question we explored was: *How do public strategic leaders experience and create reflectivity in current times, and what is the value of reflective practices in this context?*

The sub-questions in this study were (each explored in a separate chapter):

- What does literature on reflectivity and leadership in current times reveal?
- How do public strategic leaders approach reflectivity in current times?
- What is revealed by comparing the core findings from the literature with the experiences of public strategic leaders in practice?
- What are the social and practical implications for public strategic leaders?

We begin this final chapter by exploring the outcomes related to the sub-questions, followed by a discussion and conclusion. In Appendix 1 and 2, we share an overview of the findings from the four explorations (literature review, phenomenological, narrative, and normative humanistic) and the conclusions.

### *6.1.1 What does literature on reflectivity and leadership in current times reveal?*

The literature review showed that the relationship between leadership and reflectivity in empirical research is seldom explicitly explored and grounded in actual lived experiences. In this dissertation, we address this gap by focusing on both theory and practice. Therefore, this dissertation contributes to the existing leadership debate on reflective practices by exploring daily experiences and reflective practices in the context of public strategic leaders.

We conclude, based on the literature review, that the concept of reflectivity remains fragmented in literature, with a multitude of definitions. Nevertheless, reflectivity and concrete reflective practices have gradually become a normative expectation, particularly promoted in education and by HRM departments since the implementation of the Dutch education policy of 2007, aimed to stimulate individual self-direction and lifelong learning (Meijers, 2008; Luken, 2011).

One of the main assumptions found in the literature is that reflectivity is equivalent to slowing down and taking time. We found a wide range of assumptions on the nature of reflective practices. Several authors have approached reflective practices in contrast to other phenomena, such as time to think versus doing; learning versus working, or spiritual versus analytical.

**Table 1**. Two dimensions and two forms of reflective practices in summary

| Dimensions and forms | Proactively planned reflective practices | Spontaneous reflective practices in the work process. |
|---|---|---|
| Intrapersonal reflective practices (introspective) Contemplation: Mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually | Individual planned reflective practices: reflective writing, coaching, retreats, walks in nature, etc. | Individual spontaneous and reactive reflective practices; in action during the work process; exploring and giving meaning to the experience |
| Interpersonal reflective practices (relational) The art of thinking together: Mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually | Planned reflective practices with others in dialogue such as meetings, programs, etc. | Spontaneous, reactive reflective practices with others; reflecting in the moment exploring and giving meaning to the mutual process |

We specifically explored the key concept of reflective practices, which demonstrated a distinction between two dimensions of reflective practices: firstly, intrapersonal, intuitive, and embodied reflectivity on personal experiences; and secondly, dialogical sense-making with others on interactive experiences interpersonally.

In the leadership debate, the intrapersonal embodied dimension is described as a contemplative or learning activity. According to the literature, the value of this form of reflective practices lies in discerning and coming to terms with oneself through activities such as walking, writing, and meditating (among others Kok and Van den Heuvel, 2019). Accordingly, theory suggests that leaders are increasingly challenged to draw upon alternative reflective intelligences that move beyond cognitive thinking, including embodied (physical), emotional, and spiritual sensing, as noted by Vaughan (2002) and (Goleman, 2012).

The interpersonal dimension is theorised as interactive and dialogical in response to the uncertainties and ambiguities of current times, drawing on Gergen (1999), Grint (2005), Van Loon & Van Dijk (2015), Frimann & Hersted (2016) and Haslam et al. (2020). Leadership in this dimension is framed by these scholars not as a solitary pursuit but as embedded in human encounters. The value of this dimension lies in creating meaning in a relational encounter, especially during times of insecurity, as noted by Weick (2005) and Scharmer (2016). In this matter, Isaacs (1999) emphasises that a relational, reflective dialogue is more than just the exchange of words; instead, it is the embracing of different points of view, literally the art of thinking together.

Moreover, the literature-review shows a distinction between planned and spontaneous reflective practice within organisations. We found examples of proactively planned practices, individually, such as planned reflective writing, coaching, retreats, and walks in nature. Alongside this, we found proactively planned practices with others, such as meetings and reflective or learning programs. Alongside this, we found spontaneous reflective practices, in which individuals engage during the work process, exploring and giving meaning to the experience intrapersonally, as described by Schön (1987). Moreover, we found examples of spontaneous reflective practices with others in which they reflected in the moment, exploring and giving meaning to issues and the mutual process.

Various scholars such as Rittel and Webber (1973), Noordegraaf (2007), Marion & Uhl-Bien (2011) and Obolensky (2014) argue that complexity, adaptive challenges, wicked problems and accelerated forces are challenging leaders in current times, underscoring a growing concern that empirical evidence is needed on the reflective practices of public strategic leaders in present times.

### *6.1.2 How do public strategic leaders approach reflectivity in current times?*

We chose a phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of the participants, investigating how they experience and create reflectivity in present times. Drawing on insights from this phenomenological inquiry, several relevant observations about reflectivity emerged.

1. *Complexity as an attractive asset:* The participants were critical of the perceived pressure of complex challenges. They emphasised the attractiveness of this part of their work and context. In this light, the number of top sport metaphors in the descriptions about the lived experiences of participants was meaningful. This outcome adds a nuance to the perspective of various scholars who emphasise the problematic side of complexity for leaders.
2. *Avoidance of sharing vulnerable struggles as a reflex:* The analysis of reflective practices in the case of emotional incidents, revealed a dominant reflex in the stories of the leaders: When they experience distress as the result of an incident (sensing a loss of control, an emotional overload, or conflict at work), in the first instance, their reflex is to withdraw. Alone, they decompress, recover, reflect, interpret, and come to their "senses." This comes across as a flight response to stress and a reflex to stay in control, remain stable, and a strong leader for others. Even though they wish to be a connecting leader, they avoid sharing emotions and vulnerable struggles. The perceptions of others reinforce this.
3. *Addictive pace, constant stress and physical intelligence:* Even though they relativise complexity as a problem, they simultaneously describe how they are under constant pressure due to the chaotic dynamics, resulting in continuous stress and tension. These leaders' struggles reveal this pattern resulting from their values and mindset. This is illustrated by expressions such as "I have to work hard," "always take everything seriously," and "perform 100% at a high pace."

4. *Contradictory mindsets: Fixed versus growth mindset:* Participants demonstrated that they act and reflect according to two contradictory paradigms: on the one hand, the open, receptive paradigm we summarise as the "growth" mindset, with a readiness to experiment and learn. On the other hand, a control paradigm of judgement and fear, the "fixed" mindset with an attachment to the outcome of the issues at hand as noted by Dweck (2016). This underlying tension is the source of most of their struggles and the cause of their dominant reflex: working *and* learning hard at the same time.
5. *Area of tension between being a leader and a public servant:* This phenomenon concerns the role of the public strategic leaders employed in a public organisation, who must be both "leaders" and public "servants." In various experiences, their loyalty and servant mindset and working within a regulated system overrule their leadership and autonomy.
6. *Gap between theory and practice:* A gap appeared between theory and practice. Theory states that leaders a) must be reflective and address slow questions; b) must be co-creative and share meaning with others; and c) must be reflective, wise, and self-aware. These dominant narratives do not account for the dynamics within public organisations and the lived experience. The participants experience relational barriers and complexity, primarily due to asymmetrical power relations. They struggle with complex dynamics in their encounters with both employees and people higher up, often expressing machine metaphors such as "radar" and "wheel."
7. *Reflectivity, a socially desirable concept:* Lastly, we observed socially desirable behaviour. While occasionally critical of the key concepts such as complexity, none of them questioned the value of reflectivity itself. The prevailing assumption is "the more reflectivity, the better."

In line with theory, the lived experiences of the participants highlight the interplay between intrapersonal and interpersonal reflectivity, in both planned and spontaneous forms, under the overarching pressure of accelerated daily life. Planned reflectivity, while valuable as welcome time and space, was mainly presented as an instrumental task, with structured activities, coaches, and schedules. We suspect that this instrumental interpretation induces a superficial exchange.

### *6.1.3 What is revealed by comparing the core findings from the literature with the experiences of public strategic leaders in practice?*

To gain deeper insight into this question, this narrative study aimed to explore the dominant narratives present in existing literature in relation to those of the participants. This aim was reinforced by the observation that reflectivity is a socially desirable and potentially superficial phenomenon in the practices of public strategic leaders.

First, the comparative inquiry confirmed the existence of a gap between the theoretical narratives and the lived experience of participants.

The analysis of these narratives shows a dominant pattern in the participants' experiences: their "active," "do-good" mindset exists in tension with the pressing expectations imposed by the prevailing theoretical ideologies. Overall, the participants struggle with "relational barriers and complexity." They addressed these obstacles as a source of stress. The participants state that they find reflectivity important; however, their narratives demonstrate a series of perceived obstacles that hinder reflectivity:

1. First, the participants demonstrated a "heroic leadership ideology" that emphasised control and problem-solving in their narratives, leaving little space for doubt, hesitation, or a democratic process.
2. Furthermore, their narratives confirmed the instrumental interpretation of reflectivity. Reflective practices were described as a utilitarian tool for improvement, often planned and outsourced. Few examples in their narratives referred to spontaneous or contemplative reflectivity.
3. Moreover, we observed that the participants refer to reflectivity "rationally" with the aim of "control" within their rigid systems, prioritising rational adaptation over imperfections, emotions, and doubts.

### *6.1.4 What are the social and practical implications for public strategic leaders?*

This normative study aimed to explore the social and practical implications for public strategic leaders by adopting a humanistic approach as a counter-narrative. The findings confirm that dominant leadership theories impose expectations grounded in outdated representations. The exploration of the humanistic approach with an aim "to build humane societies where all individuals can lead meaningful lives"[11] demonstrated three main pressures related to today's sociological changes. We describe these pressures, pointing out the specific humanistic value under pressure.

1. *Pressure of demanding expectations focused on individual leaders:* The contradictory pressure on decisiveness and reflectivity has led to socially desirable behaviours that create a disconnect between what is preached and what is practiced. This pressure challenges the humanistic value of human dignity and the aim of creating conditions for human flourishing, including empathy and meaningful relationships (Von Kimakowitz et al., 2010; Melé, 2016).
2. *Pressure of an accelerated pace of new information and the demand for quick fixes in problem-solving:* We found that public strategic leaders generally experience daily, accelerated pressure to quickly solve problems combined with an overload of new information both fact-based and fake. This heightened pace puts pressure on the value of ethical reflectivity and an ethical dialogue with others (Von Kimakowitz et al., 2010).

11 Put forward as main aim by the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht.

3. *Pressure of vulnerability, due to visibility and the risk of transgressive reactions:* The findings identified a pressure of vulnerability due to the heightened visibility, stakeholder multiplicity, and ethical complexities. The outcomes show how public strategic leaders interpret their roles as "individuals" who react to the interpretations of "them" or "others," revealing a pervasive sense of vulnerability in their positions, without an open or genuine dialogue. The vulnerability puts pressure on the humanistic value of responsible action for all stakeholders, as noted by Melé (2016), Arendt (2003), who emphasises self-revelation and ethical accountability, and Nussbaum (2011) who highlighted the centrality of emotions in moral judgment.

Also, in this final study, the overall theme was relational vulnerability and the sense of taking a risk when acting reflectively in the environment of public organisations. Arendt (1998) elaborates on this idea, based on the notion that acting is in its essence an activity with a risk; "once set in the world, an act cannot be undone." According to Arendt (1998), acting is always relational: "we do it 'in the midst' of others who also act."

Three critical moments emerged in the data analysis asking for a heightened alertness in practice. This alertness is critical for the quality of the interaction and the outcomes. In these moments the participants demonstrate doubts, questioning whether to react spontaneously in the moment, to reflect, question, decide, argue, or to postpone such actions for another planned moment. This confirms their struggles challenging reflective flexibility, process skills, and creativity in interventions in these moments.

1. *Critical moments concerning double expectations: Reflective versus decisive.* First, the participants experience the expectation to embody both idealised reflective contemplation and, at the same time, decisiveness in their interactions with others. This leads to concrete moments of discomfort and calls for a mindset that acknowledges and endures dual projections of others, not as an assignment, but as a phenomenon to reflect on as noted by McNamee (2004) and Goedhart & Van der Steen (2016).
2. *Critical moments of power dynamics and mutual vulnerability:* The participants emphasise their struggles with the power-dynamics in their interactions with others. For both leaders and followers, this vulnerability is heightened by the pursuit of reciprocity, the emphasis on social safety, and the fear of relational tensions in a context of power differences. In the daily interactions, those with more power get more time and space to speak. These challenges require these patterns to be acknowledged through subtle communicative behaviours, practicing active listening and deliberately creating space for others and themselves, building on Ciulla (2004), Goedhart & Van der Steen (2016) and Larsson & Meier (2023).
3. *Critical moments concerning the transition from acceleration to reflectivity:* The participants share the challenge of enduring the delaying effects of spontaneous reflectivity under the pressure of fast-paced daily practices. Switching from action to reflectivity in the interaction is one of the most reported struggles. Participants note that paradoxically, reflectivity

tends to be sidelined as the pace of work quickens, particularly in hectic environments such as schools, hospitals, or ministries. The study demonstrates that switching between internally oriented (reflective, self-referential) and externally oriented (relational, task-based) cognition is cognitively demanding (Konishi et al., 2022). Konishi et al. (2022) plead for transition-time and the training of flexibility. We add to this the struggle of expressing inner thoughts and feelings in communicative language. Many public strategic leaders withdraw as they feel unable to share their reflections without disturbing the interaction and search for time to digest and find "proper" words.

Overall, two competing fundamental orientations consistently emerged in the participants' narratives: the drive to embody the "strong and decisive leader," and the "intuitive, reflective sage" who embraces not-knowing, discomfort, and uncertainty. Notably, participants appeared to be strongly guided in their stories and responses by the expectations and dispositions of others. They reported being governed by their schedules and, in short, experiencing limited space and agency for contemplation and reflection. Consequently, humanistic values such as human dignity, empathy, ethical reflection through dialogical inquiry, and the provision of emotional space are under pressure daily, while the risk of alienation has become a growing concern. Despite this, the neoliberal construct of the Homo economicus remains largely unchallenged, even as the Homo amans, with its articulated need for profound relationships and meaningfulness, asserts itself with growing clarity as noted by Hummels & Nullens (2022).

## 6.2 Discussion and conclusion

Based on the findings, new questions and hypotheses emerge, first concerning the value of slow questions in today's context, a widely adopted concept underlined by various scholars.

### *6.2.1 Considering the pressures in current times: What is the value of slow questions?*

The outcomes prompted a question in the final stage of this study concerning the pressure on humanistic values among public strategic leaders, formulated as follows: *Given the mentioned pressures in current times, what could be the value of slow questions?* One of the main assumptions found in literature and the data in this study is that reflectivity is equivalent to a "time-consuming task," requiring the act of "slowing down" and "taking time." In this light, the literature review suggests that present times necessitate new forms of reflective practices, requiring a fundamentally new perspective on leadership as noted by Obolensky (2014) and Haslam et al. (2020). Within this matter, Kunneman and Suransky (2011) argue that engaging with slow questions is essential for leaders as they face the moral dilemmas and existential complexities inherent in strategic-level challenges.

To deepen this exploration, we dive into the dimensions of the concept of slow questions underlined by Kunneman (2005, 2007, 2010); a) slow questions are existential. Kunneman (2005) contrasts them with fast questions, with an aim for efficiency and problem-solving, b) the term "slow" reflects "an ethical stance", one that takes time to listen, reflect, and suspend judgement (Kunneman, 2010) and c) slow questions call for "a dialogical space", where people can explore uncertainties without the pressure to reach a quick consensus (Kunneman, 2007).

This vision, building on Habermas (1984), envisions a "post-technocratic phase in which ethical reflectivity and dialogue take precedence over system efficiency." In this light, Habermas (1984) distinguishes between "the system, governed by economic and bureaucratic logic, and the lifeworld, the space of cultural reproduction, identity, and meaning making." He warns against "the colonisation of the lifeworld when systemic imperatives override communicative meaning" (Habermas, 1984).

Moor (2011) adds on to this by warning against violence in organisations not as physical harm but as a "structural and existential form of violence inherent to organisational life", as noted by Arendt (2003) and Cooper (1992). Moor (2011) argues that "organisational practices driven by rigid rules, detailed procedures and a fixation on control work, suppress the richness of human experience, excluding spontaneity, ambiguity and the aesthetic dimensions of life."

In our study, participants confirmed these concerns, reporting discomfort and tension while addressing slow questions under the pressure of acceleration. One participant, for example, stated, "I see a tendency among leaders to want to get results and score quickly. We become uncomfortable when things are unclear and uncertain." The reflective practices of the participants were often centred on rational improvement (with audits and evaluations) demonstrating how system logic remains dominant and limits the time for existential, ethical, and dialogical space as noted by Habermas (1984).

Nevertheless, concerning the pressure of acceleration, Rosa (2016) emphasises that deceleration is not the solution. He describes slowing down as a coping strategy for dealing with tempo-induced problems. He defines acceleration as growth in quantity per unit of time and links it to a pattern of dynamisation, warning that this is the point at which acceleration leads to dysfunctional and mute relationships with the world (Rosa, 2019).

This warning underscores the concern of Han (2023), who contends that even our reflective practices are often subordinated to a goal-oriented approach. He argues that "the dehumanising force no longer lies primarily in external systems but in our own economic and control-oriented mindset, which sustains relentless pressure for personal 'advancement' in both business and private lives."

These perspectives of Habermas (1984), Kunneman and Suransky (2011), Rosa (2010) and Han (2023) advocate for an ethical mode of thought and relational understanding over technical mastery, posing a second question: *Considering the mentioned pressures in current times: What could be the value of meaningful relations?*

### 6.2.2 Considering the pressures in current times: What is the value of meaningful relations?

One of the main assumptions found in literature is that reflectivity stems from meaningful encounters and strong relations. Rosa (2010, 2016) pleads for resonance, offering a basis for experiencing a more profound, meaningful and transformative rapport between people and their environment in a context of acceleration. Rosa (2016) describes resonance as "a relational mode of being, marked by mutual responsiveness." He defines four structural features: a) the subject must be open and able to be "affected or touched by something external", such as a person, idea, or experience (affection), b) the individual must be capable of "answering or responding in a way that is emotionally and existentially meaningful" (emotionally responsive self-efficacy), c) resonance changes both the subject and the world; "both are transformed in the process" (transformation), and d) resonance cannot be forced or commanded; it always retains "an element of unpredictability and spontaneity", which Rosa deems essential to authentic connection (uncontrollability) (Rosa, 2019, pp. 174–175).

In this study, it became clear that the concept of resonance was new to most participants.[12] The concept of resonance created a new awareness with each participant being moved by the phenomenon itself during the interviews, eliciting a range of narratives of meaningful encounters. The participants mentioned a) moments of connection with colleagues, teams or students, patients, mainly concerning the primary process of the organisation (caring, teaching, etc.) b) moments during work in a spontaneous, open interaction with others (not planned and vulnerable), and c) moments when complex processes come naturally into motion without effort or control, building on the phenomena of Kairos noted by Rämö (2002). These examples reveal resonant and unexpected moments during encounters with others, marked by a sense of surprise. The participants expressed that in their experience spontaneous social "interaction is the birthplace of meaning and sense of being moved."

This confirms Rosa's (2016) emphasis on embodied experiences of being-in-the-world. It furthermore underscores the phenomenological concerns that are central to Heidegger's (2010) and Merleau-Ponty's (2012) work. Heidegger's (2010) conception of "Dasein" as "being-in-the-world" emphasises that human existence is always embedded in "a pre-existing world" (Heidegger, 2010). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (2012) conceptualises reflectivity as part of "la chair" (the flesh), a relational ontology in which subject and object are intertwined. Reflectivity

12 These findings digested from the interviews in the first stage of this study are not included in earlier articles/chapters. We share them here to explore the question on meaningful relations.

and action are thus mutually constitutive, forming a dynamic fabric of experience through which both meaning and the world itself are continuously shaped (Rosa, 2019). From this perspective, reflectivity necessarily involves the interpretation of lived, subjective experience and cannot be detached from one's involvement with the world (Heidegger, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2012).

Secondly, the narratives illustrate the "responsive, relational nature of subject and world" underlining a second theme in Heidegger's (2010) work, the essence of "being with" ("Mitsein"); we always exist in a shared world in which we share meaning. In practice, we saw that the public strategic leaders reveal a tension: While they claim to "lead by connection," their behaviour often reflects conflicting patterns of avoidance and conformity.

This points out the third theme of Heidegger (2010), that "everyday relations to others are often dominated by an anonymous social force that promotes conformity", "the They" ("das Man"). In this regard, we observed how the word "They" was used constantly by the participants, illustrating a pattern of reactive and defensive responses, stating, "Yes, but.. "they" blame me for . . . " or "Yes, but "they" expect me to …."

Drawing on Rosa (2016) and Heidegger (2010), this experienced relational complexity and the pattern of avoidance can be seen as a form of alienation, characterised by a detachment from natural states of resonance.

The tendency to regulate reflectivity as a task or something to plan contradicts the openness and exploration it aims to foster. This gap between the desire for resonance and the dominance of rational reflective practices reinforces the experience of alienation (Rosa, 2016, 2019). It avoids fostering the existential questions, ethical stance, and dialogical space, as Kunneman underlined (2005, 2007, 2010).

The observation that participants tend to withdraw from vulnerable or emotional moments and talk about a "relational brake" tied to role expectations (repeatedly stating "but 'they' expect") confirms this concern. In narrative hermeneutics terms, they seem to be shaped by as well as "shape" their political and interpersonal environments as noted by Gadamer (1975) and Merleau-Ponty's (2012).

### *6.2.3 What may we conclude in the context of contemporary pressures?*

The participants share experiences underlining a new description of present times. Whereas we spoke of VUCA; volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous as noted by Horney et al. (2010), a new abbreviation has emerged in the past years in the leadership debate, the so-called BANI; brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible world. This abbreviation emphasises the "fragility of systems, heightened levels of uncertainty and anxiety, and the difficulty of establishing clear causal relationships in contemporary social and organizational contexts" (Cascio, 2020).

These insecure dynamics appear to increase the wish for a strong leader across many democratic countries (Van de Calseyde et al., 2021). A growing number of people choose a leader who claims to have clarity on cause and effect and intervene with quick solutions. This tendency risks confirming Scharmer's (2016) warning that "addressing 21st-century challenges with reactive linear mindsets rooted in past centuries will fuel frustration and alienation." Societal debates on leadership illustrate that "the more insecure the context, the stronger the demand for leaders who demonstrate power, also experienced as hard-not-reflective-power", drawing on Van de Calseyde et al., (2021).

There is a trend in the leadership debate that poses questions about today's context and their implications for leadership (Obolensky, 2014; Haslam et al., 2020). This study shows that not only reflectivity a fragmented concept, leadership is this as well. This is the result of the growing number not only reflectivity is fragmented, leadership is this as well. of implicit theories putting pressure on leadership leaving little space for meaningful reflectivity about the phenomenon itself (Lord et al., 2020).

This raises the question whether the growing emphasis on hard power leaves space for soft power, such as reflectivity. In response to this question, we conclude that both literature and the empirical studies in this dissertation confirm the growing relevance of reflectivity in organisations. As one participant articulated during the final group dialogue, *"*As the pace of work increases with technological change, I find that taking time to reflect has become more essential than it was two decades ago.*"*

Over the course of the study, participants increasingly articulated understanding reflectivity as a personal and intrinsic human desire. They also recognised that acceleration and predominantly rational forms of reflectivity do not adequately address the challenges of a brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible world (as noted by Cascio, 2020). Above this, the participants consistently affirmed that reflectivity has a positive impact on the quality of relationships. Together, the mentioned findings demonstrate a tension between lived complexity and system-imposed clarity as noted by Habermas, 1984).

Cooper (1992) further describes this tension by critiquing the organisation as a "representational practice." Such a practice exercises "control by arresting the process", rather than functioning as a form of reflection that remains embedded in ongoing, lived relations and conversations.

This tension invites a reorientation: From reflectivity as "control" to reflectivity as an "open process" deeply entangled with the lived realities of public strategic leaders as noted by Gadamer, (1975), Habermas (1984) and Merleau-Ponty (2012).

If reflectivity is to move beyond a functional and managerial frame, public strategic leaders could more explicitly cultivate spaces that include doubt, hesitation, perplexity, ethical ambivalence, and relational resonance (Dewey, 1933; Arendt, 2003; Rosa, 2019).

This move requires a shift away from decision-making as a linear analytical act and toward an open-ended, free, and reflective exploration. This transition involves relinquishing fixed assumptions and embracing the unpredictability of outcomes (Scharmer, 2016).

In this light, Hernes (2014) proposes a process-oriented perspective with an inverted focus for the attention structure of public leaders, coaches, and facilitators. He defines this as an "ongoing process of making, remaking, unmaking, and relating actors of all sorts into meaningful wholes" (Hernes, 2014). Applying this view to reflectivity challenges the notion of it as a fixed, rational practice. Instead, reflective practice can be seen as arising continuously through the act of reflecting itself. As Hernes (2014), Dewey (1933) defines reflectivity as an "emergent process unfolding within experience", with disturbance as the trigger of a "breakdown of habitual continuity" that gives rise to inquiry as a process of reconstructing meaning and action.

In conclusion, this study underlines that personal and relational inquiry is an essential and existential desire, above all in times of conflict and contradiction. Public strategic leaders who endure relational discomfort and take interactional risks can foster open reflective processes and unpredictable resonant spaces that invite meaningful engagement as described by Rosa (2019).

Overall, the central contribution of this dissertation is the distinction between functional reflective practices ("doing" in a planned, pre-formed activity aiming for control) and open reflective processes ("resonating" in a spontaneous and open moment, free and vulnerable).

This distinction could counterbalance the acceleration, growing relational tensions and potential alienation characteristic of our times. It invites listening, allowing "spacious" attention instead of the narrow focus on problem-solving and control (Reitz & Higgins, 2025). In this matter, public strategic leaders, coaches, and facilitators should be more precise about what practice or process they are asked to guide or counsel, why, and with whom.

This more precise exploration broadens the interpretive lens on reflectivity. It counters a narrow emphasis on control or cognitive (over)analysis, while nurturing ethics and vulnerability (Kunneman and Suransky, 2011; Arendt, 2003; Rosa, 2019).

A new hypothesis is therefore: Without reflectivity, there is no resonance in the encounter, and without resonance, reflectivity is experienced as a task or an additional obligation. Conversely, reflectivity increases the likelihood of resonance, and moments of resonance in turn, enhance the possibility of reflectivity. In this context, reflective practices can be understood as relational spaces in which new beginnings emerge through shared speech and action as noted by Arendt (2003) and Rosa (2019).

Drawing on Arendt's (1998) concept of natality, reflective dialogue enables the human capacity to "begin anew in the presence of others", marking a movement from an individual's endeavour towards "mutual natality". Mutual natality is explained as encounters unfolding by the differences in dialogue creating the conditions for resonance and the emergence of new shared worlds (Arendt, 1998).

This challenges public strategic leaders to create time to digest and find "proper" words in the process with others, while enduring the risk of disturbing others or the harmony in the interaction. As earlier stated with the words of Arendt (2003), "Acting is always relational: we do it 'in the midst of others' who also act." This asks for the acknowledgement of the inherent vulnerable position, involving the fear that, "You may be 'vulnerable'; in Latin referring to the risk to 'get wounded'; this fragility is part of our nature and cannot be escaped", Maté (2011) states. The automatic repression of painful emotions is a "defence mechanism" many public strategic leaders show, being "strong," verbally well-educated, and often rationally conditioned with an aim for control (Maté, 2011).

In summary, a) Kunneman and Suransky (2011) frame vulnerability as an appeal within professional practice, b) Rosa (2019) argues how late-modern acceleration undermines resonance, thereby weakening vulnerability as a "necessary condition for meaningful engagement with the world", c) Arendt (2003) understands vulnerability as an inherent condition of human action that becomes obscured under regimes of control and instrumental rationality, and d) Maté conceptualises vulnerability as the underlying source of addiction, with fear and pain as root causes (Maté, 2011).

All four authors underscore a central concern of contemporary society: That open reflectivity with others, combined with acting and the willingness to take risks, provides a starting point for vulnerability and, consequently, for the possibility of "resonance" and "natality" as noted by Rosa (2019) and Arendt (2003).

This aligns with Rosa's recent work (2023), where he identifies an increasing desire for natality among people living in late-modern conditions and emphasises "the role of communities as spaces in which resonance may take shape" contributing to a "sense of belonging."

In conclusion, reflective "acting" includes the act of taking a risk. Public strategic leaders and others who endure relational discomfort and are willing to take a leap in their encounters foster resonant spaces, inviting others to freely open up and experience meaningful encounters, mutual natality and a sense of belonging.

We hope this dissertation also offered a reflective and resonant space for contemplation and discernment. Only with an attentive mindset can people in organisations connect opposing values, allowing them to face the uncontrollable, and to endure discomfort. Taking a leap is an essential part of reflectivity when facing challenging times, especially when one feels that something essential and ethical is at stake. In this light, Rosa states (2019), "It is in the uncontrollable that we experience meaning."

We share an overview of the findings in Visual 1.



| **Reflective practices**<br><br>**Type & Dimensions** | **Planned or periodic**<br>Chronos<br>Instrumental<br>Policy-oriented | **Spontaneous**<br>Kairos<br>Emotional or existential<br>From a desire, need |
|---|---|---|
| **Intrapersonal dimension**<br>Personal<br>Resonance | Contemplation: moments off, reflective coaching, retreat | Contemplation on ad hoc incidents, emotions or hunches |
| **Interpersonal dimension**<br>Relational<br>Resonance | Analytical, evaluative for improvement<br>Discernment on ethical issues.<br><br>Functional reflective practices | **Contemplation on ad hoc incidents, emotions or hunches**<br><br>***Relational discomfort > Taking a risk?***<br><br>**Open reflective processes** |

1. Critical moment: **Sense of double expectations**
2. Critical moment: **Power dynamics and mutual vulnerability**
3. Critical moment: **Switching from action to reflectivity**

**Paradigms**

| | |
|---|---|
| Evaluating solutions | Resonating |
| Analytical | Emotional, embodied and intuitive |
| Aim for control | Uncontrollability, playfulness |
| Practical issues | Societal, ethical issues |
| Solving problems | Slow questions, discomfort |

**Visual 1**. Types and dimensions of reflective practices pointing out two paradigms; functional reflective *practices* and open reflective *processes*

### 6.2.4 Assumptions, limitations and implications for further research

Balancing and doing justice to contradicting values also requires an awareness of the ideological paradoxical dynamic attached to the concept of reflectivity as noted by Zizek (2019). In this regard, Zizek (2019) argues that reflectivity is never neutral but is "always imbued with ideologies that shape what is considered right or wrong." Even when leaders, for example, promote vulnerability and dialogue, they might inadvertently "legitimise the current order and reinforce their positions." It can challenge the existing order or, conversely, reinforce it (Zizek, 2019).

Future research should therefore focus on the realities of daily practice rather than on prescribing new ideologies that perpetuate muteness among leaders and others in organisations. In this dissertation, the assumption is that it is essential not only to acknowledge the acceleration and relational complexity in the context of public strategic leaders but also to develop a counterforce to these trends. While our qualitative approach yielded rich insights, the findings are context-specific (public organisations) and call for validation in broader and more embedded settings. These findings prompt deeper inquiry into how reflectivity reaches beyond leader-centric models, and whether alternative concepts, such as resonance, belonging, or playfulness, are better able to address the relational, emotional, and ethical tension present in practice. Further research could specifically address the moments of "hard power" to address the question of how reflectivity, including taking a risk, could counterplay the hard dynamics). In general, in a post-heroic approach of leadership, further research should include people cooperating in general, in teams, or in a community as noted by Rosa (2023).

Reflecting on further research, we consider art-based research as a suitable next step because dimensions of experience, such as time, and space, and ethical or existential life phenomena like resonance, belonging, or playfulness, are difficult to grasp through logic alone. Therefore, further research could incorporate this approach to delve "into the unsayable dimensions of our reality" (Visse et al., 2019, 2020).

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# Appendices

*Overview of the findings*

*Overview of emerging questions, conclusions and further research*

*Epilogue- I have no doctrine, I carry on a dialogue*

*Summary in Dutch*

*Curriculum Vitae*

*Dankwoord*

# Overview of the findings

Findings
Literature-review

| Dimensions and forms | Proactively planned reflective practices | Spontaneous reflective practices, in the work process. |
|---|---|---|
| Intrapersonal reflective practices (introspective) Contemplation across four levels: *Mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually* | Individual planned reflective practices: reflective writing, coaching, retreats, walks in nature etc. | Individual spontaneous and reactive reflective practices; in action in the work process; exploring and giving meaning to the experience |
| Interpersonal reflective practices (relational) The art of thinking together across four levels; *Mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually* | Planned reflective practices with others in dialogue as meetings, programs etc. | Spontaneous, reactive reflective practices with others reflecting in the moment exploring and giving meaning to the mutual process |

Findings phenomenological exploration

| Phenomena leadership and reflectivity |
|---|
| Complexity as an attractive asset |
| Avoidance of sharing vulnerable struggles as a reflex |
| Addictive pace, constant stress and physical intelligence |
| Contradictory mindsets; fixed vs. growth mindset |
| Area of tension of being a leader and a public servant |
| Gap between theory and practice |
| Reflectivity; a socially desirable concept |

Findings narrative exploration

| Dominant narratives in theory |
|---|
| Narrative 1: Good leaders are reflective and address slow questions |
| Narrative 2: Good leaders reflect interpersonally–co-create in dialogue |
| Narrative 3: Good leaders reflect intrapersonally and act wise and self-aware |

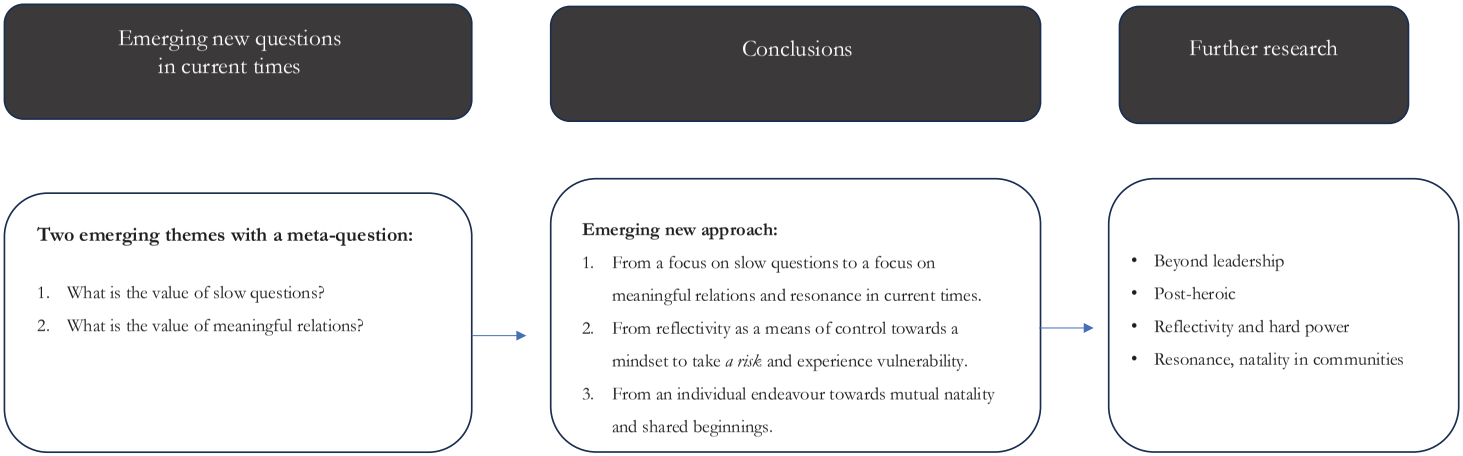
| Dominant paradigms among leaders |
|---|
| The heroic ideology of leadership, in control and solving problems |
| Instrumental interpretation of reflectivity as a goal-oriented and time-consuming task |
| Rationality; little room for imperfections, emotions and doubts in a rigid system |

Findings
normative exploration;
social implications

| Pressures | Humanistic values |
|---|---|
| The pressure of demanding expectations focused on individual leaders | The value of human dignity, empathy and meaningful relationships |
| The accelerated pace of new information and quick fixes in problem-solving | The value of ethical reflectivity and ethical dialogue |
| Vulnerability, due to visibility, risk of transgressive reactions | The value of responsible action, ethical accountability and the role of emotions in moral judgment |

| Critical moments | Required attention structure |
|---|---|
| Critical moments concerning double expectations; reflective vs. decisive | Mindset to endure double expectations and interpretations of others. |
| Critical moments of power dynamics and mutual vulnerability | The awareness to acknowledge the patterns through communicative behaviour. Practising active listening |
| Critical moments concerning the transition from acceleration to reflectivity | Awareness of the delay in switching between neural networks by planning reflective moments, and training in flexibility |

# Overview of emerging questions, conclusions and further research



# Epilogue- I have no doctrine, I carry on a dialogue

Doing qualitative research is not a matter of searching for or uncovering objective truths. It is, above all, a dialogical and reflective process, an encounter in which meaning emerges through openness, receptivity, responsivity, and resonance, always coloured by our backgrounds and prior experiences. The questions, selections, and conclusions in this study are therefore co-shaped and entangled with my personal history and interpretative lens and are in constant interaction with those who generously shared their experiences and stories.

I did not approach the phenomena and narratives as mere data, nor did I consider myself a detached researcher. This study is grounded in the view that both the selection of data and its interpretation are always shaped by a fusion of horizons: the intertwining of the researcher's experiences and perspectives with those of the participants, as Gadamer (1975) described.

The shared experiences and stories of the 31 public strategic leaders were treated with care. This epilogue is therefore a gentle reflection on everything you have read in this dissertation. Above all, it reaffirms the importance of reflectivity, not as a methodological checkbox, but as an open process of questioning, exploring, listening, and interpreting.

The process of conducting this research confronted me with many lessons that resonate with the core of this thesis. Buber (1923/1970) emphasised the essence of encounters and dialogue with the words: "I have no doctrine; I carry on a dialogue." Throughout the journey of this dissertation, I had to relive that essence over and over again.

I began with a search for a deeper meaning of the concept of reflectivity, and even this concept turned out to be a foothold, a way of gaining grip, for me as well.

As the outcomes come across as fragmented and ambiguous, I often felt lost in translation. Until I realised that, in my role as a researcher, I do not have to solve the phenomena I encounter. I may experience them and explore them further, carrying on in dialogue with others.

This led to a second confrontation: in my exchanges with fellow PhD students and colleagues, I repeatedly found myself lacking clarity or an overview of my own thesis, where they seemed to help me in this process with their reflections, questions, analysis, and intuitions. I felt insecure, imperfect, often failing, only to realise days later that I had once again stepped into the paradigm that I must provide quick answers in this PhD process (accompanied by the dominant notion that answers and solutions are the ultimate aim of any process, including this one).

Gradually, my PhD journey became more and more an open reflective process: a space in which I could think, feel, sense, discern, and come to my senses, alone, but also in long walks and equally long conversations with others.

In this context, I also discovered that I could not do this work alone (despite my childhood nickname, "Van der Stone, does it alone"). I needed others to join me and to resonate with the themes and outcomes of the research. Sometimes this arose because I explicitly asked for help, but more often it emerged as people spontaneously shared their experiences, unknowingly contributing to the research process. These encounters took place in my daily work, in conversations with friends, with my son and his friends, and even in everyday situations such as doing the grocery shopping and overhearing people talk about their day.

In addition to this, I found out how challenging it is to be reflective in the moment, during the interviews, the group dialogues, and in my daily work. I also experienced that as a researcher the expectations are present in the dialogue, affecting both the participants and my own mindset in the moment.

For example, almost all participants told me that they were impressed, or even intimidated, by someone doing PhD research because of the endurance it requires. Conversely, I, as a researcher, was at times impressed by the participant's work, involving multiple stakeholders, complex issues, and seldom easy answers, and at other times disappointed or slightly irritated by the muteness and lack of dialogue.

This mutual process of immediate judgements did affect the exchange and dialogue. It made me realise how delicate an open reflective process can be. It makes me think of a short poem by Wolters (2022).

*"Ben je mal, ik heb de leegte vast voorgevormd," which freely translates to:*

*"Are you kidding me, I already filled in the emptiness."*

It made me wonder, are there any dialogues in organisations that are not shaped by assumptions, framing and expectations?

Furthermore, I found out how hard it is as a researcher to spontaneously switch from actively interviewing to a mode of reflection. These moments ask for a brief "moment in-between" to bridge my way of sensing and reflecting. Along the way, I, similar to the public strategic leaders, encountered the pressure to react directly to the questions aiming for quick clarity.

Like any process of creativity, empirical inquiry and philosophical exploration, my PhD process was a slow process with slow questions, forcing me to slow down from time to time. This confronted me with my daily hasty pace. It was a journey in which I took one or two steps forward and one step back. A process in a constant flow of inspiration and epiphanies at one moment and confusion and frustration at other moments. A process I could only experience and endure in dialogue with others.

Therefore, I hope every public strategic leader allows themselves to explore the concepts they work with as a PhD student would: with curiosity and open-mindedness.

As I reach the end of this nearly six-year process of studying, researching, and writing, I find myself looking out at an emptiness that is both frightening and enticing. In this too, I experience a parallel with the outcomes of my research. For is it not the case that, ultimately, our fear of emptiness, and perhaps even more our fear of silence, drives us to think and speak too quickly? Does our fear of floating freely in an open space without clear direction urge us to become active, to reach for a sense of control?

I now find myself in a phase in which I often ask, what is next? And then the wise woman within me replies, "Perhaps a little emptiness, nothingness, or silence… carrying on the dialogue." Since, in the words of Buber (1923/1970), "All true living unfolds in the encounter of one being with another."

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# Summary in Dutch

Altijd aan staan

Publieke leiders en hun reflectiepraktijken in versnelde tijden; een kwalitatief onderzoek

### *Van een individueel streven naar resonantie en wederzijdse nataliteit*

De uitspraak 'altijd aan' kenmerkt de alledaagse praktijk van veel leidinggevenden[13] in organisaties in de huidige tijd. Woorden als deze zijn typerend voor de continue druk die deze leidinggevenden ervaren. Deze druk is onlosmakelijk verbonden met de 'versnelde tijd', een term die verwijst naar een sociologische tijdgeest die vaak wordt aangeduid met het acroniem VUCA en die wordt gekenmerkt door volatiliteit, onzekerheid, complexiteit en ambiguïteit. In de huidige tijd bestaat tegelijkertijd een heel andere tendens; de werkende mens heeft een toenemende behoefte aan bezinning en reflectie.

De onzekerheid lijkt verder de roep om sterk leiderschap te versterken zoals we zien in tal van democratische landen met leiders die eendimensionale oorzaak-gevolg analyses bieden en snelle oplossingen beloven. In het licht van deze context zien we in de theorie een groeiend aantal publicaties over de huidige tijd en de betekenis daarvan voor leiderschap. Binnen deze publicaties zien we steeds meer ideologieën over vertragen, betekenisgeving en existentiële contemplatie. Deze ideologieën hebben vaak het paradoxale gevolg dat de druk eerder toeneemt dan afneemt. Zo krijgen ook leidinggevenden er als het ware een taak bij: ze moeten niet alleen besturen en snelle oplossingen bieden, maar ook reflecteren en een dialoog aangaan binnen hun organisatie.

### *Hypothese, onderzoeksvragen en methodologie*

Tegen deze achtergrond is de hypothese van dit onderzoek dat publieke leidinggevenden meer dan ooit behoefte hebben aan ruimte om te reflecteren om de complexiteit en de veelheid aan informatie te kunnen interpreteren en doorleven. Het doel van dit onderzoek is om te ontdekken wat deze groep in de praktijk ervaart. In dit proefschrift definiëren we reflectie als het proces van leren op het moment dat gevoelens van twijfel en perplexiteit optreden. Reflecteren vraagt een houding van aandacht die ruimte opent voor nieuwe perspectieven en die leidt tot nieuwe inzichten voor het handelen.

Op basis van deze these luidt de centrale vraag in dit onderzoek: Hoe ervaren en creëren publieke leidinggevenden reflectie in de huidige versnelde tijd, en wat is de betekenis en waarde van hun reflectie in hun context?

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13 We hebben specifiek onderzoek gedaan naar strategisch leidinggevenden in publieke organisaties. We gebruiken hier voor de leesbaarheid de term publieke leidinggevenden of soms kortweg leidinggevenden. We verwijzen daarmee ook naar bestuurders, directeuren en senior management, dus iedereen die werkt op strategisch niveau in een leidinggevende rol in een publieke organisatie, departement, directie of team en leidinggeeft aan anderen.

De deelvragen van dit onderzoek zijn:

- Wat komt er naar voren in de literatuur over reflectie en leiderschap in de huidige context?
- En hoe benaderen publieke leidinggevenden reflectie vandaag de dag?
- Wat ontdekken we wanneer we de bevindingen uit de literatuur vergelijken met de ervaringen van publieke leidinggevenden in de praktijk?
- Wat is de betekenis van de bevindingen voor de publieke leidinggevenden?

Om inzicht te krijgen in de ervaringen van publieke leidinggevenden hebben we gekozen voor een verkennend, kwalitatief empirisch onderzoek. Deze studie richt zich primair op publieke leidinggevenden die zowel dagelijks actief zijn in het aansturen van teams als continu bezig zijn met stakeholder-management.

### *Literatuurstudie naar de concepten reflectie en leiderschap*

Om een indruk te krijgen van de historie en huidige stand van zaken van de theorie is eerst een semi-systematische literatuur-review uitgevoerd naar leiderschap en reflectie door meer dan honderd bronnen te bestuderen. Hieruit blijkt ten eerste dat reflectie een vanzelfsprekendheid is geworden, met name in het onderwijs en op afdelingen Personeel- en Organisatieontwikkeling. Verder wordt reflectie in veel organisatietheorieën beschouwd als voorwaarde om veranderingen en transities te bewerkstelligen en te voorkomen dat alleen gedacht wordt in herkenbare uitgangspunten en oplossingen. Desondanks wordt er weinig aandacht besteed aan de specifieke betekenis van reflectie binnen het domein van publieke leidinggevenden. We ontdekten daarnaast dat het concept reflectie een veelheid aan definities kent. In de literatuurstudie komt een onderscheid naar voren tussen twee dimensies van reflectie: ten eerste de intra-persoonlijke, intuïtieve en belichaamde reflectie gericht op persoonlijke ervaringen en ten tweede dialogische betekenisgeving met anderen over ervaringen in de interactie; interpersoonlijk. Ten slotte toont de literatuur een onderscheid tussen 'geplande' reflectie, alleen of met anderen, in reflectie-sessies of heidagen en 'spontane' reflectie, alleen of met anderen, door emoties, incidenten of andere momenten van verwarring tijdens het werk in organisaties.

### *Fenomenologisch onderzoek gericht op ervaringen in de praktijk*

De tweede stap omvatte onderzoek naar de dagelijkse ervaringen van publieke leidinggevenden. Voor deze onderzoeksfase selecteerden we dertien deelnemers. De centrale vraag na de literatuurstudie luidde: Hoe benaderen publieke leidinggevenden reflectie in de huidige tijd? Het onderzoek naar de ervaringen van deze groep leidde tot verschillende observaties en zeven fenomenen:

- *Complexiteit als bron van plezier:* Ten eerste blijkt dat publieke leidinggevenden vooral plezier beleven aan werken aan complexe vraagstukken; de deelnemers benadrukten unaniem de aantrekkelijkheid van dit deel van hun werk en context. Deze uitkomst nuanceert het beeld van verschillende wetenschappers die vooral de problematische kant van complexiteit benadrukken.
- *Ongemak vermijden:* Verder wijzen de ervaringen van de deelnemers in het onderzoek op een dagelijkse spanning met relationele barrières in hun samenwerkingen. Zij gaven aan te worstelen met vaak asymmetrische verhoudingen met zowel medewerkers als hun leidinggevenden hoger in de hiërarchie. Voorbeelden daarvan zijn enerzijds medewerkers die hen op een voetstuk plaatsen en hun woorden op een schaaltje leggen en anderzijds meerderen die snelle antwoorden verwachten en hiermee druk opleggen.
- *Continue tijdsdruk en waan van de dag als bron van stress:* Vooral de constante tijdsdruk en de waan van de dag blijken een worsteling voor de deelnemers. Hun uitspraken illustreren de voortdurende druk en stress die zij ervaren. Hoewel zij relativerend spraken over inhoudelijke complexiteit als probleem, benadrukten zij juist stress als gevolg van de dagelijkse chaotische en hectische dynamiek.
- *Het spanningsveld van conflicterende grondhoudingen:* De uitkomsten leggen tevens twee conflicterende grondhoudingen bloot. Enerzijds heerst een open, ontvankelijke 'growth mindset', gekenmerkt door een bereidheid om te experimenteren en anderzijds een 'fixed mindset', gericht op controle en een goed-slecht oordeel. Het schuren van deze tegengestelde intenties en waarden leidt tot een spanningsveld.
- *Dubbele rol gericht op dienen en leiden:* Een vergelijkbare tegenstelling rondom een dubbele rol en identiteit kwam naar voren, die van zowel leider als publieke diender. De deelnemers gaven aan dat het systeem van de organisatie en vaak ook de politiek vragen om loyaliteit en een dienende houding, terwijl zij tevens de positie hebben van leidinggevenden die zoeken naar ruimte en autonomie, onder andere om te vertragen en te reflecteren.
- *Kloof tussen theorie en praktijk:* De deelnemers gaven verder aan dat de waan van de dag reflectie dagelijks belemmert, ondanks dat zij vinden dat dit onderdeel is van hun werk. Vooral spontane reflectiemomenten staan onder druk als gevolg van overvolle agenda's. De deelnemers laten zich veelal leiden door de verzoeken van anderen zoals politiek, media, stakeholders en medewerkers.
- Reflectie, een sociaal wenselijk fenomeen: Opvallend is dat de deelnemers weinig kritisch waren over het fenomeen reflectie; ze gaven unaniem aan reflectie belangrijk te vinden. De dominante aanname leek te zijn: Hoe meer reflectie, hoe beter. Hun concrete ervaringen en gedragingen in de praktijk wijzen hier echter niet op (zie punt 6). Het onderwerp reflectie blijkt gevoelig voor sociaal wenselijke reacties.

Al met al lijkt het risico op de loer te liggen dat reflectie wordt opgevat als een praktische taak, wat diepgang en open uitwisseling ondermijnt. De deelnemers bleken reflectie veelal te benaderen als instrumentale bezigheid, vanuit dezelfde houding als wanneer ze besluiten nemen en projecten leiden.

### *Narratief onderzoek gericht op drie dominante verhalen uit de theorie*

Om de uitkomsten van de literatuurstudie en de fenomenologische studie verder te verdiepen, verkenden we vervolgens de betekenis die publieke leidinggevenden toekennen aan het fenomeen reflectie. Dit hebben we gedaan aan de hand van aanvullend narratief onderzoek onder twaalf nieuwe publieke leidinggevenden. We vergeleken drie dominante verhalen uit de literatuur met de verhalen van publieke leidinggevenden in de praktijk om de discrepantie verder te ontrafelen.

We noemen de drie dominante verhalen:

- Het eerste dominante verhaal in de theorie normeert dat een goede leidinggevende reflecteert en aandacht heeft voor trage vraagstukken die vragen om trage aandacht: 'slow questions'.
- Het tweede verhaal uit de theorie stelt dat een goede leidinggevende met anderen samen reflecteert in co-creatie en dialoog.
- Ten derde onderzochten we het verhaal dat een goede leidinggevende persoonlijk moet reflecteren en zich wijs en zelfbewust hoort op te stellen.

Dit narratieve onderzoek bevestigde de kloof tussen theorie en praktijk. De deelnemers gaven aan dat zij reflectie en de drie dominante verhalen daarover belangrijk vinden, maar hun concrete ervaringen en verhalen wijzen hier niet op.

Meer specifiek kwamen drie hardnekkige paradigma's naar voren die hun dagelijkse beleving kleuren en een reeks obstakels onthullen:

- Ten eerste toonden de deelnemers met hun taal een 'heroïsche leiderschapsideologie', waarin controle en probleemoplossing centraal staan, met de leider als middelpunt. Zij verwachten van zichzelf dat ze lastige zaken snel en effectief oplossen, dapper en heldhaftig, waardoor er weinig ruimte overblijft voor twijfel, aarzeling of open uitwisseling.
- Daarnaast bevestigde de gebruikte taal een veelal instrumentele benadering van reflectie. Reflectieve praktijken worden bijvoorbeeld beschreven als een positieve, nuttige tool voor verbetering, vaak gepland en uitbesteed aan coaches en begeleiders.
- Bovendien blijkt dat deelnemers reflectie veelal beschrijven vanuit een rationele benadering met als doel grip en controle te houden. Hierbij krijgen rationele kaders als 'continu verbeteren' en 'effectief veranderen' de nadruk. Dit krijgt in hun verhalen meer aandacht dan het stilstaan bij imperfecties, emoties of twijfels.

### *Normatief onderzoek naar de betekenis van de bevindingen voor de praktijk*

In deze fase verschoof de focus van een open onderzoek naar een beschouwing vanuit een normatief-humanistisch perspectief: het perspectief van de Universiteit voor Humanistiek waar dit onderzoek plaatsvond. Deze keuze werd onder andere gemaakt vanwege de bevinding dat de theorie en de deelnemers vooral putten uit reductionistische en neoliberale idealen: rationeel, instrumenteel, individualistisch en gericht op resultaat, vaak opgedaan in managementopleidingen. We vroegen ons af welke inzichten zouden ontstaan vanuit het perspectief van een andere ideologie.

Om aansluiting te vinden bij de humanistische filosofie hebben we onderzoek gedaan naar een drietal humanistische waarden die verband houden met de genoemde druk en de sociologische veranderingen in deze tijd:

- Ten eerste namen we als tegenhanger de waarde van menselijke waardigheid en het streven naar omstandigheden waarin mensen kunnen floreren, zoals empathie en betekenisvolle relaties mee in deze verkenning.
- Ten tweede verkenden we de waarde van ethische reflectie en het stimuleren van een dialoog hierover met anderen, gericht op verantwoord handelen voor alle belanghebbenden, met de nadruk op het algemene belang in de samenleving.
- Ten derde onderzochten we de betekenis van emoties en hoe deze emoties een bredere sociale rechtvaardigheid voeden.

Door de verhalen te spiegelen aan deze waarden in een extra focusgroep met zes nieuwe publieke leiders, ontdekten we een reeks concrete kritische momenten, met name als het gaat om spontane reflectie in het werk met anderen. Kritische momenten zijn momenten van potentiële transformatie, die flexibiliteit en verhoogde alertheid vereisen.

Dit waren:

- *Momenten met dubbele verwachtingen:* Deelnemers gaven ten eerste aan spanning te ervaren door de dubbele verwachting van enerzijds een hoog tempo, daadkrachtig en besluitvaardig, en anderzijds vertraging en diepgang tijdens vergaderingen of gesprekken. Veel van hen gaven aan het risico te ervaren dat een vertragende interventie geïnterpreteerd wordt als besluiteloos of zwak leiderschap. Een specifiek voorbeeld zijn momenten waarbij er druk ontstaat om direct te reageren. Deelnemers deelden hoe zij door toenemende transparantie een groeiende druk ervaren om snel te reageren, bijvoorbeeld in politiek gevoelige contexten.
- *Momenten met machtsdynamieken en wederzijdse kwetsbaarheid:* De deelnemers worstelen met momenten waarin asymmetrische verhoudingen in macht en bijkomende dynamieken voelbaar worden. Zo ontstaat bijvoorbeeld al snel het patroon dat degene met de meeste macht het meest aan het woord is. Ze ervaren in die momenten een verhoogde wederzijdse kwetsbaarheid. Dit wordt versterkt door de sterke nadruk op sociale veiligheid.

- *Momenten van schakelen tussen actie en reflectie:* Ten derde gaven deelnemers aan dagelijks moeite te hebben met het schakelen tussen enerzijds snel problemen oplossen en besluiten nemen en anderzijds vertragen en bezinnen, bijvoorbeeld tijdens vergaderingen of gesprekken. Uit neuropsychologisch onderzoek blijkt dat het veel cognitieve flexibiliteit vraagt om de omschakeling van taakgericht en in contact met anderen naar reflectie en een interne toets te maken. Met name ín het moment woorden geven aan interne reflecties blijkt de deelnemers moeite te kosten.

In het algemeen valt op dat de deelnemers zich in hun verhalen en reacties sterk lieten leiden door de verwachtingen en opstelling van anderen. Ze gaven aan te worden geleefd en weinig ruimte en regie te ervaren voor bezinning en reflectie. Hierdoor staan humanistische waarden als menswaardigheid, empathie, ethische reflectie in een dialogische verkenning en ruimte voor emoties onder druk en is het risico op vervreemding een toenemende zorg.

### *Discussie en conclusie*

De resultaten leiden tot nieuwe vragen, in de eerste plaats over de druk op de genoemde humanistische waarden. In dat kader staan we stil bij de waarde van specifiek 'trage vragen' (slow questions) met als centrale vraag: Wat is de waarde van het concept trage vragen, rekening houdend met de druk van versnelling in de huidige tijd? Dit onderzoek wijst op de aanname dat reflectie een tijdrovende activiteit is die samenhangt met vertragen en de tijd nemen. In de literatuur wordt gesteld dat de concepten trage vragen en trage aandacht essentieel zijn voor leiders. Trage vragen zijn a) existentieel, in tegenstelling tot efficiënt en probleemoplossend; b) ethisch en vertraagd luisterend, in tegenstelling tot snel oordelend; en c) dialogisch met ruimte voor onzekerheden, in tegenstelling tot de druk om consensus te vinden. Reflectie, dialoog en zingeving krijgen in dit perspectief voorrang op de drang tot systeem-efficiëntie vanuit een economische en bureaucratische logica. Gebeurt dat niet, dan ligt het risico op geweld op de loer, niet fysiek, maar een existentiële vorm van geweld die inherent kan worden aan organisaties wanneer de nadruk blijft liggen op rigide regels, gedetailleerde procedures en een fixatie op controle. De deelnemers in dit onderzoek bevestigden het gevoel van ongemak bij werken met trage vragen. Reflectie richt zich in de praktijk bovendien vaak op rationele verbetering, wat bevestigt dat de systeemlogica dominant blijft en dat de ruimte voor existentiële, ethische en dialogische reflectie beperkt is. De vraag rijst hierbij of vertraging het eenvoudige antwoord is op versnelling. De bevindingen wijzen eerder op een problematische houding wanneer zelfs reflectie wordt benaderd als doelmatige activiteit. Hierbij rijst de vraag: Wat is de waarde van betekenisvolle relaties in de huidige tijd?

Een tweede thema dat hierbij opkomt is dat reflectie ontstaat tijdens betekenisvolle ontmoetingen en hoe dit onder druk staat. Het begrip resonantie biedt hierbij een handreiking met specifieke aandacht voor de transformerende relaties tussen mensen en hun omgeving in een context van versnelling. Resonantie wordt gekenmerkt door a) openheid

en ontvankelijkheid om geraakt te worden; affectie; b) het vermogen om existentieel en emotioneel betekenisvol te antwoorden; responsieve zelf-effectiviteit; c) wederzijdse transformatie van subject en wereld; en d) oncontroleerbaarheid, onvoorspelbaarheid en spontaniteit. Voor de meeste deelnemers bleek het concept resonantie nieuw. Het benoemen ervan opende direct een diepere laag in de gesprekken en leidde tot een spontane uitwisseling van verhalen over betekenisvolle ontmoetingen. Deze voorbeelden tonen dat resonantie vooral een belichaamde ervaring is van geraakt worden in een gedeelde wereld. Tegelijkertijd zagen wij in de praktijk een spanning: hoewel publieke leidinggevenden aangeven te leiden vanuit verbinding, vertoont hun gedrag vaak patronen van vermijding en conformiteit. De gevonden relationele complexiteit, het vermijden van risico bij machtsverschillen en de sterke gerichtheid op systeemefficiëntie, interpreteren wij als een vorm van vervreemding en armoede. De vraag rijst ook steeds nadrukkelijker of de toenemende 'hard power' in het politieke klimaat en in publieke organisaties ruimte laat voor 'soft power' en voor meer geduldige en aandachtige fenomenen zoals reflectie en resonantie.

Dit onderzoek wijst uit dat persoonlijke en relationele reflectie een fundamentele menselijke behoefte is, vooral in tijden van turbulentie en onzekerheid. Het onderscheid tussen geplande, functionele reflectiepraktijken en spontane, open reflectieprocessen biedt hierin een handreiking. De bevindingen nodigen uit tot een heroriëntatie: van reflectie als controlemechanisme naar reflectie als open, relationeel proces dat ontstaat door het spontaan te doen ín het moment. Dit vraagt van publieke leidinggevenden de moed om kwetsbaarheid toe te laten, inclusief de onhandige, voorwaarts struikelende pogingen om woorden te vinden en het risico om de harmonie te verstoren. Dit leidt tot de hypothese dat reflectie en resonantie elkaar wederzijds lijken te versterken en ruimte kunnen openen voor wederzijdse 'nataliteit': de mogelijkheid om opnieuw te beginnen en zo samen nieuwe wegen te ontdekken.

# Curriculum Vitae

Barbara van der Steen (born 1973, in Amsterdam) developed an early interest in social sciences as a teenager, inspired by watching a psychologist bring reflection and perspective to a troubled situation by magically playing with language on a television program.

Years later, she graduated from Utrecht University in 1997 with a master's degree in social psychology. Her thesis focused on uncontrollable dynamics in change management and was conducted at Twijnstra Gudde in Amersfoort.

In her first professional role, she chose to immerse herself in precisely those uncontrollable dynamics and fields of tension, working as an HRM trainee at Unilever B.V. There, she experienced first-hand the pressures faced by team leaders, as well as the social impact of decisions to close divisions and implement major organisational changes.

After three years, she realised she longed for more depth and focus, and for a return to the social sciences at the crossroads of theory and practice. She began working as a coach for individuals wanting to improve their employability and as a consultant supporting organisations in developing a reflective climate.

She worked at consultancy firms B&A Group in Amstelveen and later at Berenschot in Utrecht, where she was introduced to the craft of consulting. At Berenschot, her focus gradually shifted toward leadership development and team coaching. During this period, she met her "partner in crime" in the profession, Aart Goedhart. Together, they began exploring meaning, resonance, and natality through reflective logbooks, without knowing that this would become the starting point for several books, various innovative and prize-winning learning programs; and, many years later, their own consultancy firm.

In 2005, Barbara and Aart Goedhart met Cees Sprenger, PhD. This encounter led to the formation of a team within Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company, which worked from a social constructivist perspective to facilitate organisational and team development. In the decade that followed in this learning community, Barbara further developed her interests in research and entrepreneurship.

In 2006, she was invited to teach at SIOO, a training and expertise centre in Utrecht, where she educated and coached consultants entering a new profession. She discovered her enjoyment of teaching and coaching and has continued to work as a teacher in various contexts ever since.

Together with Aart Goedhart, she developed a distinctive approach to process consulting, inspired by thinkers such as Van Dongen, Schein, Hernes, Cooper, Feltmann, Kaulingfreks, Kunneman, and others. In 2011, they launched the first edition of the learning program "Processual Thinking and Acting: De Opleiding tot Proceskundige," in which participants learn to master the art of process, as well as the creativity and joy it can bring to a world

dominated by pressure, control, and instrumental methods. In 2027, they are welcoming the 15th group, joining a community of nearly 150 "proceskundigen." In 2016, Barbara van der Steen published a book with Aart Goedhart that articulated the key philosophical inspirations underlying the meta-perspective of "process-art" with the title "Proceskunde, een pleidooi voor werken met aandacht/ Process-art, a plea for working with presence and attention."

That same year, they felt it was time to chart their own course. A year later, their consultancy firm Wenders.nu was founded, a community of proceskundigen. Nowadays, seven professionals facilitate and coach organisations when instrumental methods come to a standstill within teams, projects, or transitions. Their work helps people in organisations to (re)discover resonant space through an evolutionary and open process: "one conversation at a time."

Another significant milestone in her professional life was "The Imperfect Advisor", a book she co-authored with six peers in the fields of consulting and coaching, Thijs Homan, Mieke Moor, Marcel Kuhlmann, Antoni van Nistelrooij, Aart Goedhart and Martijn van Ooijen. Rather than sharing polished theories, the authors explored their own imperfect practices, revealing ambiguous, vulnerable, and often painful lived experiences. This work deepened her understanding of reflectivity, showing how sharing fear, pain, and vulnerability immediately generates resonance. Together with Martijn van Ooijen, she continued to create reflective spaces for professionals and managers.

In 2014, Barbara joined The School of Life, founded by Alain de Botton, as a lecturer. There, she shared her interest in philosophy with audiences seeking inspiration on themes often neglected in formal education, such as "Resilience," "Intuition," "Vulnerability," and "Leading in Times of Change", integrating her acquired skills in Yin-Yoga and bodywork with philosophy and psychology.

Having developed an interest in the social sciences at a young age, later in life, Barbara developed a parallel interest in philosophy and the art of living. It was therefore no coincidence that she chose the University of Humanistic Studies as the setting for her PhD research.

In recent years, she has collaborated with scholars from both the University of Humanistic Studies and Erasmus University's Centre of Health Leadership. These encounters have led to joint initiatives in which her perspectives on reflectivity, resonance, and natality are embraced and further developed in collaboration with professionals and leaders in practice.

Recent years have brought new adventures in Youth Care, as a volunteer at the 'Oudertelefoon' offering parents a place to reflect, as well as a member of a supervisory board offering reflective perspectives in the youth care organisation Juvent.

Like everyone else, and perhaps especially working as a process coach, Barbara, now 53 years old, continues to stumble and fall regularly in the complex processes in organisations; always searching with others. And, alongside a lifelong practice of writing and teaching, she still makes clumsy attempts to find reflective space, resonance, natality, and "proper" language for emerging phenomena within today's VUCA and BANI dynamics. The good news is that this search is never-ending, and never "mute" or silent. For, as philosopher Hartmut Rosa states: "It is in the uncontrollable that we experience meaning."

# Dankwoord

Ik start dit dankwoord bij de eerste inspiratie die ik deelde in de proloog, ontleend aan Etty Hillesum, met als kern:

*'We hebben de vragen van deze tijd uit te zoeken; het enige wat wij kunnen doen als nietige mensen is ons deemoedig ter beschikking stellen'.*

Ik omring mij met mensen met wie ik deze voortdurende zoektocht kan delen, en dat is een enorme zegen en rijkdom. Tijdens de reis van dit onderzoek ontmoette ik nieuwe gidsen, reis- en lotgenoten. Zij allen hebben dit proces tot een verrijkend feest gemaakt: soms ingetogen, in kleine gesprekken, en op andere momenten met een knal, vuurwerk en muziek.

Met ieder die ik onderweg sprak, ervoer ik het zoeken en samen ontdekken. Vaak ontdekten we dat we nog aandachtiger en 'nietiger' mochten worden in onze manier van kijken en luisteren. Alleen zo kunnen de fenomenen überhaupt gezien en gehoord worden, vaak verborgen achter mooie volzinnen of snel geciteerde filosofen en andere denkers.

Om de taal te kunnen ontvangen, luisterend en zoekend, met de verwarring en ontgoocheling die daarbij horen, werden we telkens weer gedwongen te vertragen.

Met mijn promotoren, professor dr. Joke van Saane en professor dr. ir. Gerda van Dijk, vond ik hierbij een mooie dynamiek. Zij wisten te versnellen wanneer mogelijk en te vertragen waar nodig. Mijn angst dat dit een tergend langzaam proces met eenzaamheid en wanhoop zou worden, is mij bespaard gebleven door dit sterke team, vol reflectieve en beweeglijke kwaliteiten en krachten.

Na de eerste online-coronaperiode kwamen professor Patrick Nullens en 'zijn' PhD-kandidaten op mijn pad. Bij hen vond ik mijn lotgenoten, eveneens werkzaam op het snijvlak van organiseren, leiderschap en humanisme - een combinatie die ons bij de Universiteit voor Humanistiek uniek maakt ("the odd ones out") en die ons sterk heeft verbonden. Ik dank Patrick voor het adopteren van mij als aanverwante PhD'er en voor de uitnodigingen tot uitwisseling en samenwerking, onder meer in de mooie leergang 'Anders Leiden', de activiteiten van de Goldschmeding Foundation en het congres 'Deep Governance.' Ik dank Ellemieke, Danaë en Rik voor de ontmoetingen, telefoontjes en appjes waarmee we elkaar tijdens het PhD-proces bijstonden (en nog steeds bijstaan).

Met Danaë werd het avontuur nog groter, met onze roadtrip naar Praag, waar we beiden mochten spreken op het International Leadership Association Congress 2025. Na vier dagen non-stop-samen waren we nog steeds niet uitgefilosofeerd. Dank voor die onvergetelijke dagen!

Ik dank Martijn van Ooijen en Mieke Moor als voorbeelden op deze reis. Door jullie PhD-processen te volgen, groeide mijn nieuwsgierigheid. Ik heb jullie beiden ervaren als stutten in mijn proces. Jullie wisten waar ik het over had, en dat schept een band die mij telkens weer voedde en positief verraste.

Ik dank Mariëtte Kobus, Jon Marree, Frank Hulsbos, Femke Rood en Jan Jaap van Assen voor het meelezen in verschillende fases. Met een bijzondere dank aan Marit Woudwijk. Marit, jouw vermogen om in chaos orde te zien en mij daarbij te helpen was goud waard en heeft de basis gelegd voor dit proefschrift.

Mijn collega's van Wenders wil ik hier een speciale plek geven. Anna Stutje noem ik als eerste; zij heeft de eerste tot de laatste woorden meegelezen en mij continu aangemoedigd. Dirk Jan wist observaties nog verder tot leven te brengen door zijn eigen dagelijkse praktijk in die hardnekkige organisatiesystemen. Heli, dank voor je scherpte; Marcia, voor het delen van jouw observaties en oog voor schoonheid. Hugo, dank voor jouw verwondering en het meezoeken tijdens onze wandeling in Amsterdam, in de hitte van de zomer in 2025.

Aart Goedhart heeft in dit dankwoord uiteraard zijn eigen plek. Hij is mijn metgezel in vele opzichten, altijd liefdevol én meedogenloos. Een combinatie die mij telkens weer raakt, verrast, vaak ook frustreert en vervolgens opnieuw nieuwsgierig maakt. Jouw vasthoudendheid en scherpte hebben dit onderzoek in elke denkstap verrijkt, soms met kleine accenten en op andere momenten met grote verschuivingen. Ik ben dankbaar dat we al zo lang samen oplopen in deze wondere wereld.

Mijn 'huisgenoot' tijdens dit wordingsproces en zoon Boris heeft mij het meest achter die laptop zien zitten, op de meest vreemde tijdstippen. Toen ik begon in 2020, jij was toen vijftien, luidde het credo: *'Mam gaat nu aan haar huiswerk; ga jij die stap zo ook zetten?'* (wat soms werkte en vaak ook niet). Inmiddels ben je eenentwintig jaar en heb je zelf een mooi vak gekozen waar reflectie een wezenlijk onderdeel van is. Jouw humor en relativerende opmerkingen bij mijn vaak verstrooide aanwezigheid - *'Goed geslapen, mevrouw de PhD?'* - hielden het licht en mij vooral alert. Onze lange wandelingen en gesprekken, waarin we samen zoeken naar de kunst van het leven, voeden mij elke dag, en daarmee ook dit verhaal.

Vanuit de metafoor van de marathon dank ik de mensen die regelmatig even langs de kant stonden te juichen, met een aanhoudende positieve energie. Ik zie daar Antoinette van den Steenhoven, Dagmar Enklaar, Monique Groenewold, Ellen de Bruin, Laurens Drogendijk (en familie), en uiteraard mijn zus Laura met Remco, mijn broer Maarten met Sophie, en mijn altijd belangstellende en lief betrokken ouders.

In dit gezelschap bevinden zich ook twee mensen die mij in het bijzonder hebben bijgestaan in de laatste etappe. Mariëtte Kobus en Antoinette van den Steenhoven, het was voor mij een eer en groot plezier dat jullie mijn paranimfen wilden zijn. Dank voor jullie steun en energie bij dit avontuur.

En tenslotte dank ik mijzelf dat ik in 2020 dit onderzoek begon en daarmee een 'vehikel' en ruimte voor reflectie creëerde. Een bron van plezier en dé plek waar ik mijn indrukken kon verwerken. Het bracht van alles; van onvergetelijke nieuwe ontmoetingen tot stille plekjes om te schrijven. Van lange treinreizen voor interviews tot vroege ochtenden met Atlas Ti. Het hield mij scherp en geïnspireerd. Op naar nieuwe avonturen als reflectie-alibi. Want ik? Ik kan niet zonder de stilte en het avontuur.

We hebben de vragen van deze tijd uit te zoeken, en dat zal na vandaag niet veranderen. Wel voel ik, met het bedanken van al deze bijzondere mensen, de wijze, troostende en ook prikkelende woorden in complexe tijden, toegeschreven aan Sint-Augustinus, tot leven komen: 'want zoals wij zijn, zo zijn de tijden.'

*— Augustus 2026, Barbara van der Steen*

*Ter nagedachtenis aan prof. dr. Anne Goossensen, commissielid en bron van inspiratie in de Luisterkunst.*

## Vertraging

*Soms zou je willen dat er vertraging is*
*Dat een vriendelijke vrouwenstem vertelt*
*"De sneltrein op weg naar het volgende*
*Vertrekt van een ander spoor*
*En heeft vertraging*

*Want het weet nog niet wat te volgen*
*Onze excuses daarvoor*
*Onduidelijk is hoelang dit gaat duren*
*Wij wensen u een goede reis*
*Vergeet u uw persoonlijke bezittingen niet"*

-BvdS 2026

## Schakelen

*Altijd aan?*
*Nooit uit?*
*Ik ben geen schakelaar,*
*was ik dat maar.*

-BvdS 2026

