

THOUGHTS FROM A VELVET SOFA

Reflective practice is a key component of many professions. Thinking critically about our practice is important for professional improvement and for change – opportunities and threats – to be better understood. In this article, **Maciej Szczukowski** compares his experience of ATC with his recent experience of psychotherapy as a new profession, considering how reflection at work has affected his practice, and how it might benefit yours.

KEY POINTS

- Even after leaving the operational environment, front-line practitioners continue to be somehow involved in the profession.
- Understanding and implementing changes requires time for discussion and reflection.
- Reflective practice involves time for reflection, learning and self-development, challenging one's personal and group assumptions, blindspots and biases.
- Reflective practice can be developed from very early stages of training.

I have been an air traffic controller for over 17 years. We now handle more than twice as much traffic compared to what I witnessed at my airport on the first day of my on-the-job training. Since that day I have heard a dozen 'maydays' and many more 'pan pans' (and have read about hundreds more). Usually, soon after each of them I have seen many changes and have felt their effect on cooperation, efficiency, safety, and even team morale.

I have seen changes that were discussed properly beforehand, and changes that were just imposed. I have seen changes that worked, changes that failed, changes that were overlooked, and changes that were delayed. Being a trainer at the local training centre, I have also seen the process of change in students' knowledge and awareness of the ATC profession.

I have also been a psychotherapist for almost a year and a half. A psychotherapist is a person who helps to create conditions in which clients can make their existence more satisfying. In a certain way, a psychotherapist is

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like an air traffic controller who creates conditions that make pilots' work as safe, efficient and satisfying as possible. A decision to begin a second career, so different to the previous one, has shown how challenging change can be. But it has also shown how much one can learn from such a change.

Reflective practice

Contrary to what many believe, an ATCO's work does not stop when she or he removes their headset. We remain somehow involved mentally, even without conscious reflection. Perhaps there has been an unusual event that we wish to make sense of. We also have recurrent training, secondary duties, and of course read material relevant to our profession, such as *HindSight*. This kind of involvement is even

more obvious for therapists. The process of psychotherapy does not only cover the actual face-to-face counselling work (as you may see

it in movies, with two people sitting opposite each other). It also requires significant time for reflection, learning and self-development – reflective practice. A professional therapist is also expected to attend regular supervision sessions. This 'supervision' is different to supervision in ATC. A psychotherapy

supervisor is an experienced and highly qualified therapist who discusses the work of the colleague she or he supervises, and complements it with a different perspective, reflection, and ideas, helping to create a strategy for future work.

In my first supervision sessions I quickly realised that I need to make a very important change. At first, I was preparing for them by making scrupulous, detailed notes covering almost every minute of every session. By reading them to my supervisor I tried to deliver the most detailed image of client's difficulties. Very soon, however, I learned that such precision is not necessary, nor even welcome, because it may obscure the bigger picture.

What is more important to discuss and reflect is how the therapist understands and experiences the patient's difficulties and the therapist's own reactions to them. That is essential in order to improve one's practice. This was so revealing for me! After 17 years (so far) of continuous, meticulous and precise work with data, much of which is critical to air and ground safety, I was told that there is an alternative and that it works in a domain in which one deals with most sensitive and sincere emotions. I changed my style and the quality of my therapeutic work improved. I became more interested and involved in how a client experiences something, rather than any specific goal or resolution – something we are so used to in ATC.

Application to training

I decided to use this experience in the local training centre. Now during classroom training, when a trainee asks me what phraseology should be used in a given traffic situation, I ask back what are the difficulties in finding the best solution at this particular moment. Then

I ask what is the outcome that she or he wants to achieve.

When approached with such an attitude of concern and collaboration, the trainee is better able to find the resolution, with much less effort and much more satisfaction than if I would simply provide a resolution. That understanding makes the student (and me) more confident that when a real traffic situation evolves, she or he will be better able to re-phrase the phraseological message accordingly. With ongoing reflection, the student will be able to adapt and respond to a change, and not simply react according to a strict rule. The student will be more competent, in general (see Peeters, 2018).

Reflective practice in aviation?

In aviation the continuous traffic growth, a neverending race for better performance and efficiency leaves less and less space for such thoughtful reflection. This is something for which there is always time in a counselling office. Would I offer a client a set of rules, regardless how tempting it could be for both the therapist and a patient, I am sure it would be rejected as soon as client's inner voice would remind them about all the limitations, pressures and anxieties not yet taken care of. Would I be given a new ATC procedure (or equipment or additional task) without letting me, the person responsible for its use, understand how it takes care of my needs and those of other stakeholders, I would sooner or later look for a way around it. We all would. That is how we act, as humans.

How often do front-line staff engage in reflective reading, discussion and writing about our profession? What is our commitment to reflective practice? Is mutual mentoring something that

could be of value to controllers and others in aviation, beyond training and competency schemes?

The word 'reflection' appears many times in this article. From my ATC experience as well as the time I have spent so far on the velvet sofa in my counselling office, I believe that we should invest more time in reflection, including discussions about our practice and about changes that affect our practice, regardless their size or range. Although it requires effort and time, reflecting on experience is vital to ensure that changes are appropriately designed and implemented, and not merely rejected or worked around. **S**



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Reference

Peeters K. (2018). Competency based training: Visible and invisible competencies. *HindSight 27: Competency and Expertise*. Brussels: EUROCONTROL.