CPD: The Professional Helpsheets Series

REFLECTING
ON DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES

Looking at reflection as a key stage in the development process
What is reflective practice?

Reflection is a way of learning from your experiences. It is an active process of reviewing your thoughts and actions in order to maximise the benefit of any experience. Most of us engage in reflection to some extent, but we are often inconsistent or unsystematic in how we approach it. We are often unbalanced. Some people have a tendency to focus most of their reflection on negative experiences: mistakes, failures and poor performance. This can lead to your undervaluing your strengths and overemphasising your weaknesses, glossing over less triumphant occurrences and so running the risk of making the same mistakes again. True reflective practice treats all experiences — positive and negative — as potentially valuable learning opportunities.

There are essentially two types of reflective practice:

Reflection on action
Here you reflect after the action has taken place in order to apply the learning to a subsequent activity. This could mean taking time out from a current activity to re-evaluate before recommencing.

Reflection in action
Here you reflect on the action while it is still in progress without interrupting it. This requires the ability to think on at least two levels simultaneously. It is easier for some types of action than for others. It is also easier to do if you have got into the habit of reviewing through reflection on action.

Reflection will not always offer you a solution to a problem but you may learn to understand and clarify situations that would otherwise have remained an obstruction to your professional development. Thus reflection allows you to consider what additional knowledge might have been helpful. It allows you to speculate on how a situation might be handled differently. It also allows you to check and expand your understanding of a situation or see it from a different perspective.

Such reflection can be undertaken by individuals, teams, departments or whole organisations.

The benefits of reflective practice

Adding value to our experiences
Rather than just benefiting from whatever learning occurs during an experience, through reflection you can add extra learning by seeing the experience in a wider context. By making connections to previous learning and other experiences, you can gain a greater understanding of the significance of even seemingly unimportant events.

Getting unstuck
Groups and individuals can get stuck at a particular stage of development. The application of reflective practice, either on an individual basis or in groups, can generate a range of strategies for moving beyond this stage and for getting the wheels of learning and development turning again.

Re-evaluating objectives
Personal and group reflection can help to clarify previously set objectives in the light of recent experience. This can prevent the possibility of continuing with a particular course of action that is no longer appropriate.

Opening up new perspectives
People may be in the habit of reviewing experiences from their “normal” perspective. By also “seeing” an experience from the perspectives of others and by “re-viewing” an experience through a variety of “windows”, people can escape from tunnel vision and find novel solutions to recurring problems.
Developing observation and awareness
The more involving an experience is, the harder it can be to observe what is happening objectively. Promoting reflective practice can encourage observation, perception and general awareness, both during and after experiences.

Valuing progress
By allocating time to review and analyse activities, you can show that you are dedicated to making progress. By allowing and encouraging others to engage in reflective practice, you can foster an environment of continuous improvement.

Using success
Reviewing can help people to enjoy success, to understand how it happened, identify what they need to continue doing and to get accustomed to the idea that they can be successful. This can lead to increased motivation and enthusiasm for group and individual goals.

Avoidance of recurring mistakes
An open and objective approach to errors is more likely to lead to improvement in practice than to denial, defensiveness or unresolved feelings of guilt.

Empowering people
Conducting reviews enhances people’s ability to learn from individual or group experiences. Improved learning ability, together with increased confidence, allows people to become more independent and more capable of self-development.

The process of reflection
The process of learning through reflection has often been described as a cycle. However, it may be more accurate to represent it as a spiral, because this represents the idea of growing and developing rather than ending up in the same place that you started from.

The following diagram of the spiral of reflective practice illustrates the various component activities of reflective practice following on from an action.

Recall
To review an experience you need to remember it. Ideally, reflection should take place as soon as possible after the event so that it is fresh in your mind. In some customer service and advisory professions an event may be recorded in some way to aid the reviewing process. It may help to record a detailed written or verbal description of the event that you are reflecting on. You could include the context in which it happened, who else was there, the roles that each person fulfilled, the expressed intentions of everyone involved, what you did, what the other participants did, the exact order of events, the exact words used, the tone of voice and body language of participants, etc. It may also be useful to assemble the recollections and feedback of other participants or observers.
**Recognise**
The next stage is to identify and acknowledge the significant parts of the experience. What went well? What didn’t go well? What went as expected? What was a surprise? Because we are likely to be dealing with successes and failures, it is important to remember that it is not just your thoughts and actions but also your emotions, attitudes, assumptions and convictions that need to be brought under the microscope. Your performance may depend just as much on your frame of mind as your skills and knowledge.

**Analyse**
Here you attempt to separate out the various strands of the experience so as to look for causal relationships. What effect did your knowledge (or lack of it) have? What effect did your skills and procedures have? What effect did your understanding and interpretation of the situation have? What effect did your personality or attitude have? It may not be possible to answer these questions with any certainty, but it is important to speculate about possible cause and effect.

**Contextualise**
It is often useful to widen the scope of reflection. How do the issues identified in this situation relate to other situations? How does the situation relate to your prior learning or training? How does it relate to the experiences of others? How might it be viewed from someone else’s perspective? How might learning from this experience enable you to understand other situations better?

**Research**
At this point the reflective process moves from backward looking to forward looking. You should attempt to identify any new knowledge, skills, understanding or perspectives that might enable you to deal with the situation in a more effective way. It may be that previous learning is relevant but has not been applied to this situation. This may involve asking for help or advice from other people.

**Plan**
Here you make an active commitment to do something about any learning needs that you have identified. This may involve enrolling in training, but it could just as easily be deciding to approach a future task in a different way to see if it is more effective, or observing others to learn from their approach. It is important that your plans are concrete and specific. See the helpsheet *What is a PDP?*

**Change**
At some point you will have to put the learning from the previous stage into practice. This will almost always involve a certain amount of uncertainty and risk. To change your behaviour is often an uncomfortable experience, giving rise to feelings of conscious incompetence. Perseverance may be necessary, alongside an increased sensitivity to the outcomes of any new approaches.

**Evaluate**
Having attempted to put into practice any new learning, you can conduct a further review to work out what difference it made, and thus continue the spiral.
Structuring reflective practice

Reflective practice is simply creating a habit, structure or routine around examining experience. How much and how often reflection is undertaken is up to the individual or group, depending on the reasons for such reflection. At one end of the spectrum, a work group could go on an extended retreat after a long period and could spend a great deal of time documenting and analysing the learning that has emerged since it last took the time to stop and deeply examine its work. At the other end, an individual could reflect very frequently, bringing a high level of awareness to their thoughts and actions. The most effective form of reflective practice is likely to be a combination of short- and long-term reviewing.

Designing a practice of reflection means both clarifying the purposes that it needs to serve and identifying realistic opportunities to engage with it meaningfully. This section describes some factors that you may want to consider when implementing and facilitating a programme of reflective practice, especially if it is being done at the group level.

**Purpose**
What is the purpose and objective of the activity? Who decides on personal and group objectives?

**Timing**
How often will it occur? What mechanisms and facilities are in place to make this happen at group and individual level?

**Place**
Where will the review happen – at work or at a neutral venue?

**Methods**
What approaches do you intend to use to reflect on your practice? For example, could you use reflective diaries, peer meetings or meetings with a supervisor/mentor?

**Ground rules**
Is there a need to state explicitly the requirements for no blaming, only constructive feedback, honesty, confidentiality, etc?

**Participation**
How will you maintain high levels of involvement for each individual? How will you help those who cannot express themselves readily?

**Ending**
How will you decide when to finish? Will this be agreed in advance? How will you gauge and attend to emotional needs at the end? How will you work out realistic follow-up action? What support is available for follow-up action?

**Further reading**

Written by Pat Wade and Robyn Gleeson of the Careers Group, University of London.

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