WE TEND TO VALUE OUR ABILITY TO LOOK FORWARD

THE POWER OF REFLECTION

In a world where speed and agility are the driving forces for many organizations, we tend to value our ability to look forward rather than backward. Yet, one of the most useful tools for effective learning and development is reflection.

Critical reflection is one of the four fundamental ways in which we learn and improve. This holds true for learning in the workplace and in life. However, many organizations have lost sight of the value of reflection as an effective means of development, as well as a way to identify where and when things have gone wrong.

Of course, there are exceptions. Military after-action reviews (AARs) are structured processes that analyze what happened, why it happened and how it could be done better.

The speed of learning and development is often reduced to a slow walk without acknowledging and understanding errors, and then deciding the changes in behavior and action to ensure the same errors are not made again.

Even if your organization has an after-action or project review process it is always helpful to spend some time reflecting individually in a structured way. Some forward-thinking organizations now encourage this type of reflection and narration of work by providing the facility for personal blogs on the intranet or by implementing storytelling. Qualcomm, the global mobile technology company, uses its successful "52 weeks" program to encourage employees to use structured storytelling for reflection and to share information, attitudes and behaviors across the company. Initially started as a weekly email for new hires, the program is now firm-wide and provides a key repository of reflective stories and experiences.

Learning in 4 Steps: The Role of Reflection

There are many theories of learning, but we can boil the process down into these four key areas:

Challenging Experiences → Opportunities to Practice → Creative Conversations → Time to Reflect

- **Learning through Experience:** We learn a large amount through exposure to new and challenging experiences. "Work that stretches" is often the best teacher any of us will ever have.

Research tells us that immersive learning and learning in context provides the most memorable learning experiences. This is one reason for the increased interest and activity in experiential and social learning in the past few years. However, experiential learning is still often under-valued and under-exploited by learning professionals. As the late professor Allan Tough said "Most of the learning is under the waterline."

- **Learning through Practice:** We learn through creating opportunities to practice and improve. Without practice we can never hope to become high performers. We can't for a minute imagine our great sportsmen and women rising to the top of their game without hours and hours of practice, even when they are world champions. What makes us think becoming high performers in our work is any different?

- **Learning through Conversation:** We learn through our interactions and dialogue with others — through informal coaching and mentoring, and building social networks inside and outside work. Conversation is the "lubrication" of learning and development. Jerome Bruner, the greatest educational psychologist of our era, once said "Our world is others." We often forget this fundamental fact.

- **Learning through Reflection:** Reflection is the "glue" that we need to exploit the other forms of learning. Charles Handy, the management guru, writer and observer, points out that '"Experience plus reflection is the learning that lasts." We learn through taking the opportunity to reflect both in the workflow and away from our work. We can then plan further activities that will incorporate our learning and improve our performance further.

Reflective Practice

A good starting point for embedding reflection into daily workflow is to approach the practice at two levels: individual reflection, and reflection with colleagues and team members. Reflective practice itself doesn't just happen. It is a learned process. It requires some degree of self-awareness and the ability to critically evaluate experiences, actions and results.

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