

Reflection: For Insight and Learning

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Stepping Back, to Spring Forward

In its most literal form, the word “collaboration” means working together to achieve a shared outcome. This is important when Mentoring, as we know it revolves around a “collaborative” relationship. The aim is for two people to work actively together, to fuel Mentee growth.

Both Mentor and Mentee create a high-touch relationship, one that is enacted over a relatively long period. The illusion is that “Mentoring” is administered in those moments where both are “together”. However, though there may be regular monthly meet ups plus ad hoc interactions, the face-to-face touch points over its life, are limited, and proportionately infrequent.

Considerable attention is instinctively given to moments when Mentor and Mentee are together, involved in “Mentoring magic”. But, for the majority of their time they will be apart. That’s when “Reflection” kicks in, to look back on the felt experiences when both were together. It also explores those interstitial moments and activities during times where both were apart.

Reflection in a Mentoring Context

Group reflection is possible when both are together. However, we’ll focus this Article on reflection as a solitary activity. It is something that both the Mentor and Mentee can choose to do, though perhaps with slightly different emphases.

The word itself is derived from Latin, meaning a “bending back”, to perceive an experience in a new light, and, with new insight. It is often used in Leadership & Learning context, and intuitively a flow from prior beliefs & assumptions, through action & experiences, to reflection & insights.

In a contemporary sense, reflection is a process, a set of actions taken in looking back on an earlier experience. Sometimes it’s relevant as a problem-solving tool, triggered in response to an issue that’s surfaced. Other times, it’s a creatively constructive tool, powerful when exploring more effective ways of doing things differently next time.

Reflection is a stepwise process. It starts with a close-up view of rich yet raw data, and ends with a broader perspective that yields insights. It moves a person from close “Attachment”, to a position of distanced “Detachment”. Early on the emphasis is quite descriptive. It emphasises, memory, from a recognition of what happened, to an explanation of events as they unfolded.

Later, the process creates distance from the data, applying thought to “frame” those early understandings, in the context of the event itself. Questions are injected to analyse and then synthesise meaning from the experience. Finally, yet more distance is used to frame different perspectives, which in turn, shape deeper meaning, and create new learning and insight.

The Process for Reflection

This process splits into two broadly differing phases; Observation & Review. “Observation” is crucial, and capturing the data is a “Deliberate” act. A reflection journal can be very handy. The “Review” phase with critical and creative thought subsequently follows. Outputs from this phase are much more “Emergent”, as it gently surfaces relevant insights and learning.

Time for Observation can be a challenge, especially given the pace of working life today. So, an effective process typically incorporates a “Reflection Journal”. This allows the observer to capture assumptions, events, interactions, and afterthoughts as they occur. The journal affords them time to be present, stay focused, avoid distractions, and maintain awareness.

Whether the preference is for Pen or PC, the medium used doesn’t matter as much. What does, is the “Content” that’s captured. Resourceful observations are ones that codify thoughts & feelings, actions & outcomes, and, what works & what doesn’t. It’s always good to keep things looking ahead and in the positive too; it’s more motivating to review during the second phase.

Observations happen at any times that feel relevant. Capturing honest self-talk in a Journal whilst still closely attached to an event, is powerful. In contrast, time needs to be specifically set aside to conduct the second phase. “Review” is a much more detached process. It’s best done at a time and place that offers up few distractions; it’s thoughtful.

Review requires distance; standing back, questioning, exploring new perspectives, challenging earlier thoughts. It’s a creative process, as alternative paths, interpretations and actions are brought to bear. It’s a critical process, as possibilities are evaluated for goodness of fit. Different insights, deeper learning, and new courses of action; all stem from deeper thinking.

The Power of Reflection

In the “Busy-ness” of business, there seldom seems time to catch breath. Reflection strategies can be beneficial. They help a person create the time & space within which to consider more effective approaches to the ways they do things. There are three contrasting areas to highlight.

First, reflection is a peacefully quiet and humble act; it strokes the introvert inside each of us. The humble leader, and strengths of low-profile leadership, was spawned at the end of the last millennium by Jim Collins in his book, “*Good to Great*”. Much is also being written nowadays about the value of introversion. Reflection helps us to strengthen and develop our quieter side.

It encourages detachment from the external noises of others, as we tune an active ear to those important inner conversations. It opens a window to look inwards to frame new meaning. It also provides us ample capacity to recharge our batteries. Reflection doesn’t cause us to stop “Doing”, it encourages us to start “Being”.

Next, it’s something that everybody can do, without reliance on others. As Stephen Covey signalled almost thirty years ago, it encourages us to “control” what we can control. Reflection allows us to be free of the need to blame others for what might or what might not happen. It provides permission to concentrate our finite energies on that which is within our power.

This is especially important within a Mentoring relationship, as it's possible from time to time, that one party may misread the intentions or actions of the other. Pointing an outward finger of blame, has potential to derail the relationship. Focusing on steps that can repair a relationship, is a much more productive investment of effort. Personal reflection affords us opportunities.

Finally, an effective Mentoring relationship encourages experimentation. Reflection respects the recursive nature of trials, and yields insights to help elevate activities beyond a "Hit & Miss" basis. It fosters learning, as it allows both to analyse experiences, synthesise meaning, feed forward ideas into their conversations, prototype new actions, and importantly, evaluate results.

It's a time effective tool too, that can be engaged at most any given moment. If a few minutes break free during the day, it's easy to jot a few thoughts down into the "Reflection Journal". If a larger chunk jumps out of your day, it's also easy to review recent Journal entries, in order to search for patterns. Reflection is a powerful and purposeful act that yields dividends.

Kick-Starting the Relationship: The First Meeting

In the next Article, we'll continue to look at relevant strategies for effective Mentoring. However, it's time to rewind back to the very start. We'll consider what are some of the helpful things that a Mentor and Mentee can do as they approach their *First Meeting*.

The Article was originally commissioned by the Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants (ISCA) and the Singapore Accountancy Commission (SAC), as part of their CFO Mentoring Programme. It was written by The Amanuenses Network Pte Ltd (www.amanuenses.net) and republished on their websites and the IS Chartered Accountant Journal, with all rights reserved.

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