

Using Reflection To Leverage Learning

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MANAGERS WHO succeed in today's turbulent business environment are those who learn quickly and apply that learning to unpredictable, rapidly occurring new situations. Human resource professionals are always searching for new ways to help leverage learning. However, most initiatives are elaborate, time-consuming, and expensive. Typically, they are long-term solutions that require corporate-wide behavioral changes beginning at the top of an organization.

Here's a simple, high-impact exercise that uses the time-tested tool of reflection—the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder carefully and persistently its meaning by developing inferences. Pausing briefly during meetings or structured activities to reflect on the learning that is occurring requires no new skills, no elaborate processes, and surprisingly little time.

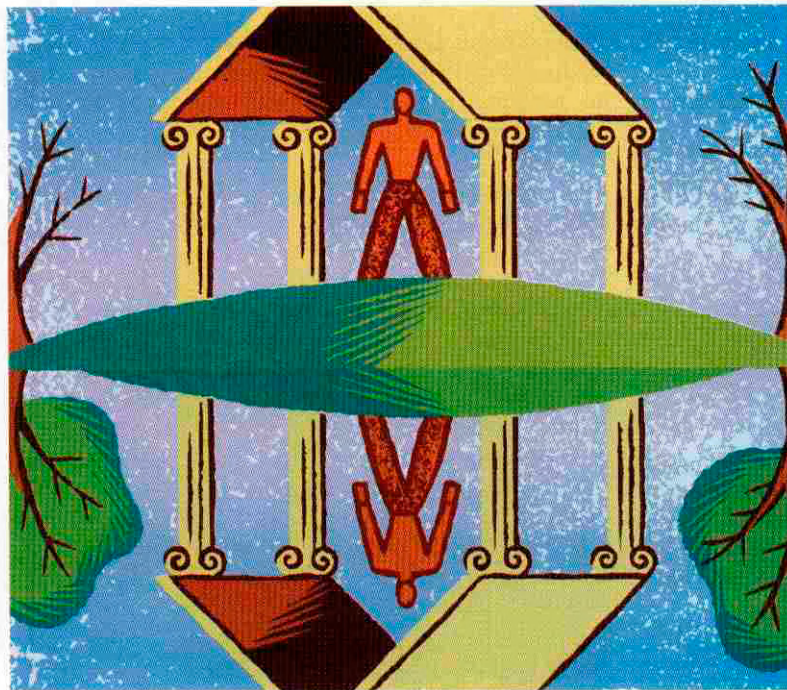
Reflection basics

We created the reflection exercise to add value to meetings and conferences. It can

- ▶ help surface insight and learning themes from events or experiences
- ▶ help link learning with job performance
- ▶ provide more thoughtful, personal feedback than is possible through traditional evaluation approaches.

Participants have reported these unintended benefits:

- ▶ Talking about insight with others helps foster a sense of community.
- ▶ Participants gain experience with a set of simple tools they can use in the workplace.
- ▶ The exercise helps synthesize



learning in a way that makes it easy to share learning with co-workers.

The reflection exercise borrows from and simplifies a few of the tools and approaches we use in reflection workshops and intact learning groups. They include journals, learning logs, learning-oriented conversations, and group dialogue sessions. You can use them individually, in pairs, or in groups. When combined, they enable learners to progress through these important stages of reflection: wander, capture, and share.

Wander. During the wander stage, participants think, write, or talk in unstructured, free-flowing ways; they follow ideas wherever they lead. They can reflect by writing in journals, talking informally with another person, or talking with several others in open-ended group discussions.

Participants explore puzzles, try to understand emotions, and raise random ideas that may seem unconnected. Encourage them to be disorderly, ambiguous, and creative. You can provide guiding questions or categories, but use them to stimulate reflection rather than request specific answers.

Capture. This stage begins the process of making sense of the learn-

ing that occurs during the wander phase. A primary tool for capturing learning is the learning log. Logs may differ. A simple one that gives learners space to list their insight and the implications for action works well. We often add a column for people to categorize their insight. Learning logs can be used to extract lessons from journal entries or to summarize learning from formal or informal conversations.

Share. The last stage is important for several reasons. Re-

formulating the wording of people's insight helps others understand. Reporting insight to others also opens an opportunity for feedback that can result in a changed perspective or additional insight. It also provides an opportunity to influence the learning of others. Indeed, this stage might also be called *teach*. We all know that teaching a topic is one of the best ways to master it.

Sharing can occur by publishing the results in writing or by discussing the insight with others. As you will see, the sequence of the exercise corresponds to each phase, and it uses some of the tools described previously.

How-to

The first part of the exercise is done individually. Ask participants to think about all of the learning opportunities (formal and informal) and insight that occurred during the particular experience, such as a meeting or an activity. To stimulate their thinking, they can refer to the agenda and any notes in their learning logs. Ask them the following questions as reflection prompts:

- ▶ Have any intriguing ideas emerged from your informal discussions?

- ▶ What ideas from the formal presentations stand out in your mind as being particularly important?
- ▶ How do these ideas relate to other similar ideas you have read or heard about?
- ▶ How can you use these ideas in your work?
- ▶ How would you characterize your personal involvement thus far? Did you reach out actively to connect with new members or just with people you already knew? Did you ask questions or provide information to others?
- ▶ When did you see your energy peak? Decline? Why?
- ▶ What made it easy or difficult for you to learn? What does that say about how you prefer to learn?
- ▶ Are any general themes emerging?
- ▶ What are the three most important things you learned?
- ▶ How will you describe your learning to others?
- ▶ What actions do you plan to take based on what you learned?

Because of time constraints, ask participants to review the reflection questions and choose a few to prompt their thinking rather than the entire list. Provide blank paper for notes.

This part of the exercise is similar to keeping a journal. Offer many of the same guidelines, such as using drawings, diagrams, and metaphors; pushing beyond surface evaluation; accessing emotions and thoughts; allowing contradictions; and observing the exercise and other participants.

Next, participants go through these three steps:

1. Each person makes a list of his or her insight and the implications for action, using learning logs. Encourage participants to not censor themselves and to list as many items as possible. Later, they will decide what insight to share with others.
2. Participants form pairs and take turns discussing some of the more significant insight they recorded. Remind them to keep their learning logs handy and to record any new insight that occurs as they report their own or as they listen to their partner's report.
3. Last, a large-group closure activity concludes the exercise. Participants take turns reporting their insight: an item of content-specific learning that they plan to implement when they re-

turn to work and something they learned about themselves. Those items may come from the learning logs, or they may arise in the course of the closure activity. Use a standard feedback sheet to collect reactions to the meeting or conference, including the reflection exercise.

HOW TO LEVERAGE LEARNING

Step 1: Individual Reflection (15-20 minutes). Review learning from a meeting or other activity using the agenda, personal notes, and the reflection questions (wander). Record specific insight and action implications in a learning log (capture).

Step 2: Paired Reflection (15-20 minutes). Take turns reporting the most significant insight and the action implications (share). Record new insight in a learning log (capture).

Step 3: Group Reflection (20 minutes). Report the insight and its action implications: one content-specific, and one personal (share). Go around the room until everyone has reported those items. Facilitators conclude the session with their own insight.

Ground rules

The following ground rules can help avoid potential trouble spots.

- ▶ Provide a break before beginning the reflection exercise. This will ensure that participants are physically and mentally refreshed.
- ▶ Remind participants that individual learning styles vary greatly and that some of them may be more willing than others to engage in part or all of the exercise. Let them know that you'll use a variety of methods. Gain their commitment to give each one a try.
- ▶ Ask participants to remain in the room without talking if they finish the individual reflection part of the exercise before others do. The intent here is to create a "community of reflection" in which each person is working with his or her own thoughts. Often, new insight will surface after participants believe they've captured all of

the learning—by reviewing what they wrote or waiting to see whether new ideas occur. This step is important, though it's difficult for some participants to recognize that. Make a strong pitch for staying in the room and not talking. Be prepared to follow this ground rule yourself.

- ▶ As people form pairs to discuss their insight, remind them that they will make their own choices later regarding what to share.

- ▶ Emphasize such typical ground rules as confidentiality and treating others' ideas with respect.

- ▶ During the large-closure activity, limit participants' reports to simple statements about their learning. There should be no explanations, background, discussion, debate, or questions. The 20 minutes allowed for this part of the exercise is based on our experience using it with groups of 40 people; each person has approximately 30 seconds to report.

Resisting temptation

Most conference and meeting designers try to ensure that people get the most value for their time and money. Unfortunately, that often translates into tight agendas with little time for processing information. The reflection exercise is one way to assure that the information presented at a meeting is remembered and used.

Each time we use this tool, the time seems extremely tight as the end of the session nears. Because of that, we have been tempted to replace reflection with more tasks. Each time, we have to resist that impulse and devote the last 45 minutes to an hour to reflection—with powerful results.

The action implication: Trust the power of reflection and make it a regular ritual for closing a meeting or an activity.

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