

12 Self reflection



Technique sheet

Problem-based learning resources

Introduction

We all think about our actions – even if we don't realise it. We may feel pleased about something we have done or disappointed, worried, or even upset. This is normal and is called self-reflection. Self-reflection in the workplace is a more formal look at performance, skills, knowledge and attitudes as they relate to our specific work role. This process can be demanding or even a bit frightening. So just how clearly can you see yourself when you look at your reflection?

How can I organise my self-reflection?

A good way to start is to set the parameters of your reflection: is it about your performance at a particular task (e.g. 'how well did I do with that presentation to the management team?') or a more general review of progress (e.g. 'do I feel more confident to work with less supervision compared to a month ago?'). Your company might

have suggestions based on their appraisal systems. Next, explore your performance using any evidence you have. This evidence can be your own feelings (e.g. 'I am now much more confident at costing a project') or formal qualifications (e.g. 'I am now qualified to change this gas valve'). Finally review your performance against your original intentions or targets – have you achieved or exceeded your targets?

- Make sure you start your self-reflection by defining a focus for your thinking and gathering any evidence that relates to your performance.

What is the context in which I have been working?

You do not often work alone. Think about the factors that will have affected your performance (e.g. 'there was never enough time to do the job properly and everyone agreed this' or 'this job was well within my skill set and I had all the necessary resources'). These contextual factors can help to explain your performance and your feelings about it. Remember that these should not be used as excuses. The phrase 'It wasn't my fault!' is rarely useful in a self-reflection session because it actually encourages you not to think about things – just blame someone else! Sometimes problems created by others (e.g. the component was stuck in customs for 3 months because the regulations had changed) will have disrupted your work and it is fair to recognise this. Equally there will be times when you have triumphed in very difficult circumstances (e.g. 'everyone said that the client was very difficult but I managed to get along with him and we enjoyed working together').

- Make sure you identify key factors in your work environment that affected your performance and reflect on how you responded to these issues.

I was ill last week, does that count as 'context'?

Yes. If you were ill or there was some other personal issue that affected your performance (e.g. your laptop was stolen or a close relative was seriously ill) they count as context. However, these are, hopefully, one-off or unusual events. Take them into account when reflecting on your current position but they

probably should not lead to significant long-term changes. These events can be traumatic so do not beat yourself up over things you cannot control. Of course, if your laptop was stolen four times in the last year you may want to think about how careful you are with storage!

- Make sure you consider all the context issues but remember that some are beyond your control and so you cannot make future plans to deal with them.

What do I do if I feel I'm really not coping?

Sometimes self-reflection can make us realise how unhappy and stressed we are. It's OK to feel a bit pressurised, it can give us that bit of energy to be better. However, over the long term, stress can be very destructive. If you feel as though you're too stressed at work you need to access support, sometimes called wellbeing support, from a suitable person. In college or school this could be a teacher you trust. In work it could be a manager or senior colleague, or in some cases, a specialist provided by the company. Take the opportunity to discuss your feelings because a conversation and action earlier can often head off more serious problems later.

- Make sure you act on insights from your self-reflection – even if they show you are not coping very well. A conversation and early help is much better than waiting for it to become a significant problem later on.

So where do I go with this?

Self-reflection involves looking backwards – but should also lead to suggestions for moving forwards. If you are not happy with your performance identify where it went wrong, including any context factors, and explore ways of behaving differently next time. When reflecting you may come up with a long list of things you want to change – but concentrate on a few issues rather than trying to change everything in one go. We're all only human and change is not always easy! Setting targets is valuable and you may find SMART objectives useful for very specific work-related objectives. Some changes might be more general (e.g. 'I will catch the earlier bus to college so that there is less chance of me being late for class') and some might be very personal ('I will stop winding up Steve over his accent – even though it's fun!').

- Make sure your self-reflection leads to some changes to ensure that your next self-reflection session is more positive. This is your responsibility – but others may be able to help.



Check yourself

You should be able to answer these questions easily after reading this sheet.

1. Who is responsible for your self-reflection?
2. Why is self-reflection a useful thing to do?
3. When do you think is the best, and worst, time to ask for help? Why?



Taking it further

These activities will deepen your understanding of this topic.

1. Make a list of some of the tasks you have been set over the past few weeks or months. What were the context issues that affected these tasks. Did they help (e.g. 'I work in a very supportive team') or hinder your performance (e.g. 'the college workshop was shut due to a gas leak')? Review the impact on your performance – how did you feel about how well you did? What were the triumphs? Where did you perform less well than you hoped?

Now plan any changes for the future that would make triumphs more likely and any failures less likely. Pick the top three changes and commit to making those. In a few weeks, review your performance – have your changes helped?

2. Consider doing a personal SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Draw a cross on a sheet of paper and label the top left hand corner Strengths with Opportunities in the corner below. Weaknesses go in the top right and Threats in the bottom right. Now fill in the quarters – Strengths and Weaknesses (we all have some!) are about you (Internal) and Opportunities and Threats are about the context and your place of work (External).
3. Now look at your paper. How could you use your Strengths to take advantage of future Opportunities (e.g. 'I can program in javascript and there is a major website needing building coming up soon')? How might you convert some Weaknesses into Strengths (e.g. 'I often fail to deliver projects on time because I forget to take equipment or spare parts to the site. I will make a list before I leave the depot next time – and check it twice!')? If a Weakness becomes a Strength does the Threat disappear?