Developing your reflective practice

What is Reflective Practice?

Reflective practice describes a systematic approach to reflection that involves creating a habit, structure and routine around reflecting on our experiences.

Reflective practice can be an individual or a group experience. Whether you choose to learn from experience as an individual or with colleagues depends on the purpose of your reflection – your personal learning agenda. For example, if you are working on a Learning Question, you may find it more helpful to explore and share your thinking together with your colleagues. If you need to make sense out of a week's worth of meetings, activities and frustrations in order to decide how to proceed with a project then you might choose to reflect on these individually first before sharing your thoughts with your colleagues. If, on the other hand, you want to consider your role in a recent conflict with a colleague, you may choose to do this alone in order to work out how best to handle similar situations in the future.

Benefits of Reflective Practice

As well as benefiting us as individuals, Reflective Practice can also benefit our teams. Specifically, Reflective Practice can help teams[1] to:

- Uncover new information – by sharing ideas with others, individuals' memories can be triggered, and new information and more refined insights can emerge.
- Limit biases – a thorough and critical discussion about information (impressions and data) means it is cross-checked and we can point out when we feel an issue has been represented inaccurately.
- Build a clear picture of a situation / event / process and reach consensus – by discussing data, contradictions and gaps, these can be understood, and gaps can be filled.
- Ensure well-reasoned, meaningful actions – joint analysis can reveal the structural causes of problems and solutions, leading to better planning and action.
- Identify good practices – by examining what has worked well and reflecting on why and how, we can build up an in-depth understanding of good practice.

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[1] Source: IFAD Guide to Project M&E, Section 8 (Reflecting Critically to Improve Action), p8-4 Available for download from: http://www.ifad.org/evaluation/guide/8/index.htm

- Facilitate action that has broad ownership – the more people that understand the causes and nature of issues, the more this can motivate people to invest in making change happen.

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

A reflective practitioner is someone who takes the time during or after their work to step back and make sense of what has happened, and why. Reflective practitioners try to better understand the often-unstated personal theories of how change happens[2] that guide their actions. Becoming more conscious of these personal theories of change often involves the reflective practitioner in challenging their own assumptions and the assumptions of colleagues.

Reflective practitioners may 'reflect *on* action' or 'reflect *in* action'. Reflecting *on* action means reflecting after the event. In other words, reflecting *on* action is distanced in time and space from the original experience. Reflecting *in* action involves 'thinking on your feet' *during* the activity itself and is more challenging but also more immediately rewarding as it can influence decisions and actions as they unfold in real time.

Reflecting on action and reflecting in action both demand a high level of individual competence. Reflective practitioners need four key competences: Self Knowledge, Inquisitiveness, Emotional Intelligence, and Critical Thinking.

Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge involves understanding and having insight into one's self-worth, motives, character and capabilities. Self-Knowledge falls under three categories:

- Knowledge of what you can *do* – your capabilities
- Knowledge of what you *know* and what you *understand* – your knowledge and wisdom
- Knowledge of *who you are* and who you wish to be – your character, motives, identity and plans for the future

The deeper the individual's self-knowledge, the greater their potential for in-depth reflection and learning.

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[2] These personal theories of how change happens are different from the 'Theories of Change (ToC) that guide the design and implementation of projects and programmes.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify, assess and manage one's own emotions and those of other individuals and groups. Emotional intelligence comprises five domains: Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Self-Motivation, Social Awareness and Social Skills. The first three are personal domains and the other two are social domains.

Self-Awareness comprises:
- Emotional awareness: Recognizing one's emotions and the effects these have on yourself and others.
- Accurate self-assessment: Knowing one's strengths and limits.
- Self-confidence: Sureness about one's self-worth and capabilities.

Self-Regulation involves:
- Self-control: Managing disruptive emotions and impulses.
- Trustworthiness: Maintaining standards of honesty and integrity.
- Conscientiousness: Taking responsibility for personal performance.
- Adaptability: Flexibility in handling change.
- Innovativeness: Being comfortable with and open to new ideas and new information.

Self-Motivation consists of:
- Achievement drive: Striving to improve or meet a standard of excellence.
- Commitment: Aligning with the goals of the group or organization.
- Initiative: Readiness to act on opportunities.
- Optimism: Persistence in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks.

Social Awareness requires:
- Empathy: Sensing others' feelings and perspective, and taking an active interest in their concerns.
- Service orientation: Anticipating, recognizing, and meeting the needs of others.
- Developing others: Sensing what others need in order to develop, and strengthening their abilities.
- Leveraging diversity: Cultivating opportunities through diverse people.
- Political awareness: Reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships.

Social Skills include:
- Influence: Using effective tactics for persuasion.
- Communication: Sending clear and convincing messages.
- Leadership: Inspiring and guiding groups and people.
- Change catalyst: Initiating or managing change.
- Conflict management: Negotiating and resolving disagreements.
- Building bonds: Nurturing instrumental relationships.

- Collaboration and cooperation: Working with others toward shared goals.
- Team capabilities: Creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals.

Inquisitiveness

Inquisitiveness is the willingness to be curious and inquiring about your work and your organisation, for example by asking yourself questions. Inquisitiveness involves:
- Looking for patterns and connections
- Questioning current knowledge and understanding
- Building on your existing understanding
- Being curious about underlying causes
- Uncovering issues on which to focus further inquiry

Critical thinking

Critical thinking is the application of logical principles, rigorous standards of evidence, and careful reasoning to the analysis and discussion of claims, beliefs, and challenges. Critical thinking involves:
- Examining issues from different perspectives
- Taking a systems approach
- Seeing beyond established ways of thinking
- Identifying larger patterns, dynamics and interrelationships
- Challenging assumptions
- Identifying the root causes of issues
- Being aware of cultural and contextual issues
- Acknowledging intuition, emotions and empathy

In order to be a reflective practitioner, we need to develop these four competence areas.

Tools for Reflective Practice

The most useful tools for reflective practice are based on questions, stories and dialogue.

Questions Because reflective practice is structured around inquiry, *questions* are key to effective reflective practice. A simple tool that uses questions for reflective practice is the After Action Review (AAR). An After Action Review involves reflecting on an activity, work-project, event or task using the following simple questions:

- What was planned?

- What actually happened?

- Why did it happen?

- What lessons can we learn for next time?

For most situations, the After Action Review questions are powerful enough to generate useful insights. However, if you really want to reflect in-depth on an activity, you could use some or all of the questions in the three-stage reflection process described in the flowchart below.
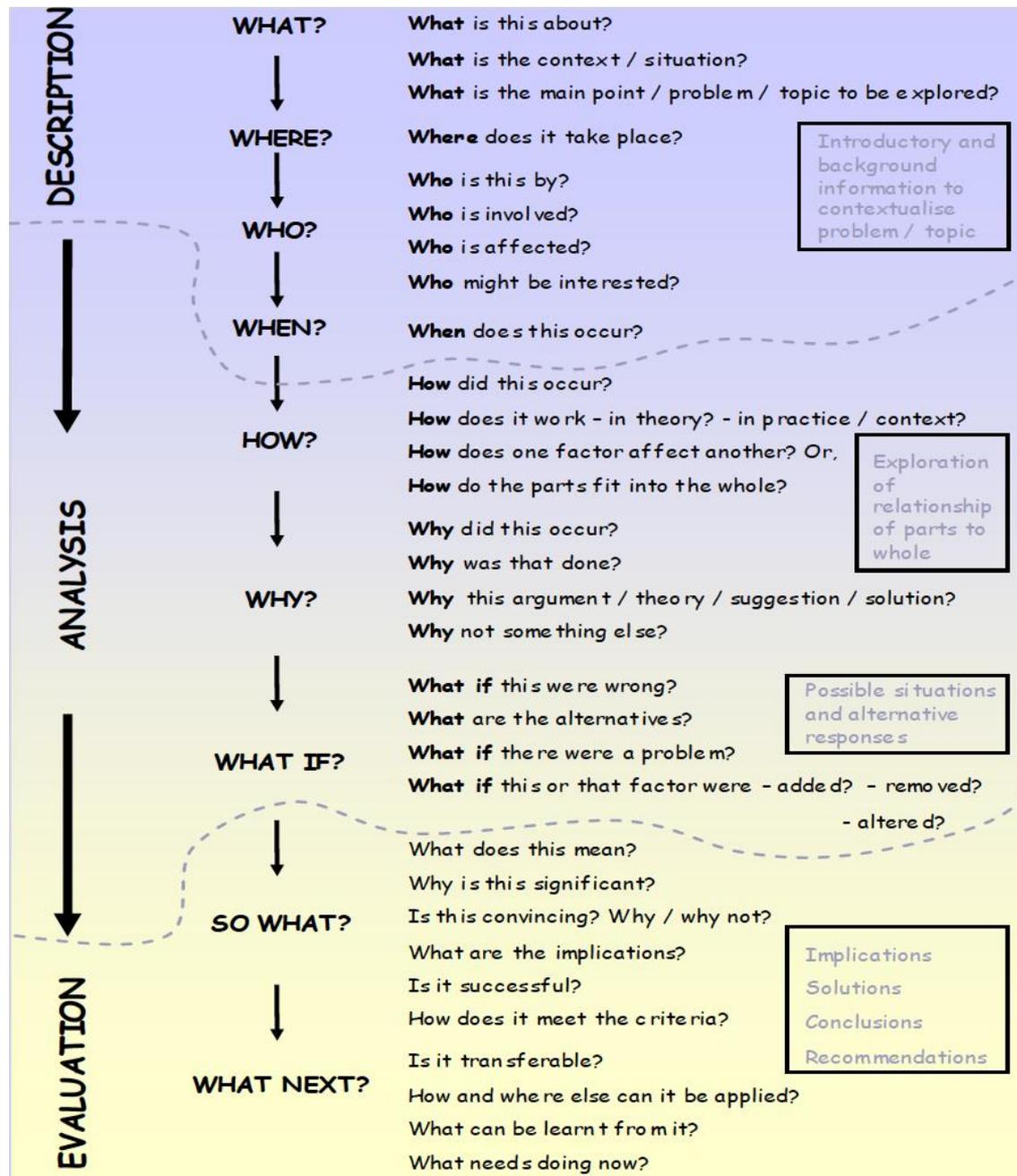
See also *How to Develop Learning Questions* in Framework resources

Stories are narrative accounts of experience. Stories make reflection easier because they enable us to 'relive' our experience. Critical Incident Review is a story-based tool that can be used systematically to examine, reflect on, and learn from positive and negative critical incidents. Critical incidents are situations (incidents) where action was taken or decisions made that had a significant influence on subsequent events. In this context, the word 'critical' means 'of significant importance' to the people involved. The outcome may have been positive or negative, intended or unintended. The following steps describe how to use Critical Incident Review.

1. Select a critical incident to reflect on (useful sources of critical incidents are personal journals, blogs, notebooks, monitoring forms and reports).

2. Recall and describe the experience in writing (create as full a picture of the experience as possible). Drawing cartoon-style pictures can be a useful way of bringing the incident to life.

3. Analyze the experience (examine the experience in detail and come to some preliminary conclusions about it – why was it 'critical'?)

4. Interpret the experience (consider the critical incident in the light of your other knowledge and experience in order to understand why things happened as they did).

5. Identify and explore alternative actions (what could have been done differently?)

6. Take action (if the issue is still 'live' consider what to do now and what the consequences of taking action will be)

Dialogue involves having a creative conversation with one or more other person. It can be useful to have a dialogue with others as part of your process of reflection because:

- They may ask questions you have not thought of yourself

- They may offer a different way of seeing things

- They can act as a sounding board for your ideas

- They can validate your thoughts about a situation

- They may help you to put events into a different context

- They bring their own knowledge and experiences to the situation which may help your understanding

- They may offer alternative courses of action to those you have come up with.

Choosing the right person, the right time and the right place are all likely to contribute to the usefulness of the dialogue.

Developing as a reflective practitioner

Here are some ideas for what you can do to develop as a reflective practitioner.

- Keep a diary or journal (or an online blog) and use it most days to record interesting experiences, ideas, reflections, and questions.

- Keep a log book to record, describe and explain significant events and critical incidents that are either related to, or have a bearing on, projects.

- Assess your reflective practice competences (self-knowledge, inquisitiveness, emotional intelligence, critical thinking) and work out ways to strengthen your skills.

- Use regular team meetings to reflect on work progress, focusing particularly on any implications for planned activities.

- Use management supervision sessions to share your reflections with your line manager.

- Get into the habit of using reflective practice tools (such as After Action Review) regularly on your own and with others.

- Examine project monitoring records and use them to reflect on past experience and identify ways of improving project outputs and outcomes.

- Record and reflect on success stories and good practices, and identify the underlying reasons for the success.

- Join an online community, participate in the discussions and contribute your ideas.

Further reading

For more on self-knowledge see:

Argyris, Chris (1991) Teaching Smart People How to Learn, Harvard Business Review, May-June 1991, pp5-15. Available at http://pds8.egloos.com/pds/200805/20/87/chris_argyris_learning.pdf

Smith, M. K. (2001) 'Donald Schön: learning, reflection and change', The encyclopedia of informal education, www.infed.org/thinkers/et-schon.htm

For more on how to use questions in reflective practice:

ADB (2009:52) Asking Effective Questions. Manila. Available: http://www.adb.org/publications/asking-effective-questions

You can find a good, short introduction to After Action Review in the Knowledge Sharing Toolkit. Available at: http://www.kstoolkit.org/After+Action+Review

For more on emotional intelligence see:

ADB (2009: 49) Understanding and Developing Emotional Intelligence. Manila. Available at: https://openaccess.adb.org/handle/11540/2760

For an overview of self-reflection techniques see: Britton, Bruce (2010) Self Reflection. Available at: http://snv-website-2015.live.dpdk.com/public/cms/sites/default/files/explore/download/capacity_development_in_practice.pdf

Sorgenfrei, Mia and Rebecca Wrigley (2005) Building Analytical and Adaptive Capacities for Organizational Effectiveness, Oxford: INTRAC. Available at: http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/402/Praxis-Paper-7-Building-Analytical-and-Adaptive-Capacities-for-Organisational-Effectiveness.pdf