A Common Sense Approach to Reflection

What is reflection?

Reflection is simply the art of looking back or examining what has happened at a certain time and assessing whether you would make any changes with hindsight.

Chances are, this is a process that you would already use every day of your life. For example, if you are crossing the road and you have underestimated how fast a bus was coming towards you, then you might reflect that you would be more careful in future. Look back, assess, and then plan for future episodes.

Similarly, reflection can be used for good events too. If you surprise your mum on Mother’s Day with a bunch of flowers and she is thrilled, you will look back, assess and probably more inclined to repeat the process at another time.

The principle is the same when using reflection within the work setting.

How do I go about doing reflection?

If you look back on your practice in the last week, for example, there will be certain circumstances that stand out for whatever reason. It may have been a lovely patient who was very appreciative of the care you gave, it may have been a great example of teamwork or conversely it may have been a critical patient episode.

When looking back it is important to put yourself in the picture and ask:-

• What was my role in the event?

• How did I react?

• Was it the right reaction to make at the time?

• Would I do it differently next time?
If the answer to the last question is “NO”, then this is still a valid piece of reflection. It serves to validate your practice and consolidate your thinking.

If the answer is “YES” then you are already thinking about the changes that you would make if the situation arose again.

There are other questions that you might like to ask yourself:-

• Who else was involved?

• How did we all work together?

• What was the communication like?

Whilst obviously not wanting to be too prescriptive here, there are some questions you will ask yourself time and time again. There will also be others that crop up when examining certain situations. All will be valid if they help you to look back, assess and plan.

How will it help me in my job?

If you take the time to look back at every aspect of your work, then you will find that it should add to your job satisfaction. There should be no more unresolved issues that niggle at you and upset your working day as the issues can be sorted out as they occur. When you first try out your reflective skills you may feel that it takes time and that is something you do not have to spare especially in clinical practice. As you become more accomplished at looking back at your work and assessing exactly what happens, you will get quicker at this skill and it will easy to encompass it into your day.

How can I use reflection professionally?

Reflection can help you and your colleagues to analyse you work practices and plan for the future. If for example you are using reflection to validate your practice and a similar event or circumstance occurs, then it may be that practices may need to be changed. You may identify that you personally need some further training to help you deal with the new
situations that you find yourself in at work. Some areas use a SWOT analysis to examine what Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats you feel are present within you and your work place. This sort of analysis would not be possible unless you had the skills to look back and reflect on your own skills and your own work area.

Reflection can help you in planning your future career. If you have recognised a specific skill that you have and are assured of it’s value within the work place and beyond, then using reflection to target this and plan ahead for career changes perhaps can be a very rewarding task.

**How can I improve my reflection skills?**

As already stated, reflection is a skill that you have probably been using for many years, both at home and at work. If you wish to try formalising your reflective thoughts for a portfolio perhaps then a very useful way of starting would be to talk it over with a manager or mentor. They can help you both look at the situation objectively and help you see what others may have seen in the same situation. Documenting what you thoughts are for your portfolio can be very rewarding as in time you will see how your reflective thoughts have changed and how skilled you have become at the process. These thoughts and reflections can help an employer or an organising body see how you are developing as a professional practitioner. Reflection can also be used as part of your training and education for your role.

In some journals they have articles which carry a timed reflective activity which can be added to your portfolio and increase your learning. So at first you read the article, then undertake the suggested activity and document the process. Then you either submit the work to the journal for formal accreditation or include the whole piece in your portfolio for personal use. Either way you can gain credit for something that you probably already do every day, that is read articles, reflect upon it ands how it affects your work and make decisions upon that reflection.

If you are practising your reflective skills with others, then using a group approach may work for you. There may be a quiet time where you and colleagues can discuss the past weeks work and identify a high and a low each. Chances are, if there are a few of you, your experiences may be similar and then you as a team can plan for future events.
If your work means that you are mainly on your own, it does not mean that you cannot practice reflective skills. If you are a member of an organisation such as BOPA, then there may be a colleague across the organisation that may be willing to “buddy” you in this task. This buddy role would entail a give and take approach with contact either by phone, email or in person. The same steps could be undertaken in looking back at situations, assessing them and planning ahead for future encounters.
Recommended Reading:


