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A coach's brief guide to reflective practice

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What is reflective practice?

People learn all the time, but most of their learning happens without conscious Reflective Practice is a way of recognising and articulating what we're learning on a moment-by-moment basis. We can distinguish between three terms:

- Reflection: thinking about something that has happened, or might happened, without any specific purpose
- Reflective practice: thinking about experiences in a purposeful way, capturing the learning so that we can use it
- Reflexivity: thinking about how we reflect

The general benefits of Reflective Practice include:

- Becoming more self-aware, more observant and better able to manage our emotions and those of others
- Greater understanding of systems and therefore better decision-making
- Increased open-mindedness, leading to higher creativity and greater capacity to question our own and other people's assumptions
- Greater compassion towards ourselves and others
- With the addition of reflexivity, increased insight into how we and others make sense of experiences

Reflection is closely associated with the acquisition of wisdom. By reflecting on experience – our own and that of others – we develop deeper understanding of our inner world, the world around us and how these worlds interact. For coaches, reflective practice is how we develop our own, unique philosophy of *being* and *doing* that shapes how we perceive and work with our clients.

A useful distinction comes from an academic article in 2016 (Haarhoff and Thwaites). It distinguishes between:

- Reflective practice – how we reflect upon an experience and the way we and others reacted to it
- Reflective skill – how we review and reconstruct experiences, better to understand them
- Reflection as a process – focusing on the issue, reconstructing it and learning from it-
- Reflection as a system – how we bring existing knowledge and expertise to bear, either to reflect on our own issues or to help another person reflect on theirs.

Journaling and reflective diarying

Effective reflective practice requires us to reflect about the past (What happened?), the present (what am I thinking and feeling now?) and the future (What might happen? What do I want to happen?) Most professional bodies in coaching and mentoring recommend that you maintain a learning diary. It is also an essential part of your learning on this accredited programme.

Your reflective diary is also valuable to help you prepare for supervision. When the same thoughts or concerns are repeated on different occasions, this is a sign that there are issues here you could usefully explore. And when describing a team coaching session or any part of a session, your journal's record is likely to be more accurate than the narrative you tell yourself subsequently.

Both EMCC and ICF have guidelines on what to include in your journal and how to structure it. Here are some additional thoughts that will help your reflections:

- What role did you play for the client team? How did that align with what you and they expected?
- When did you feel most and least in flow?
- What was your emotional journey through this session or assignment?
- What patterns do you see in yourself, in the team, in your co-coach team?
- What emotions appear to be particularly associated with these patterns?
- Whenever you intervened in the team's conversations, what were your motivations?
- What intuitions do you have about this assignment? (e.g. nagging uncertainties)
- What could you have done differently? What might have been the impact of a different choice?
- If you apply the lens of "painful self-honesty", what might you see differently?
- What opportunities for personal growth do you see?

Holistic reflectivity

As in any activity, where creative thinking is required, reflective practice in coaching is improved by taking multiple perspectives. A simple way to do this is to review purposefully from these four viewpoints.

- Thinking about how we think, or metacognition. For example, clarifying the assumptions behind our thinking and questioning them.
- Thinking about how we feel. For example, naming emotions and identifying emotions that were less obvious, because they were overshadowed by more powerful ones.
- Feeling about how we think. For example, how do the assumptions we make reflect on our self-image as a "good" person?
- Felling about how we feel, or meta-emotion. For example, what emotions could you choose to replace those that are unhelpful?

Reflective practice in pairs

In the context of team coaching, coaches frequently work in pairs. Good practice is to:

- Have a debrief after each coaching intervention, in which you review the session and identify areas you would like to reflect upon. These include both what happened in the team and how the two coaches worked together.
- Write your journals separately

- Share your key learnings and key questions for a further learning dialogue between you. (It is up to the contracting between you, whether you share your full journal entry.)
- Decide what you would like to take to supervision. If you are going to “pairs supervision” together, agree the learning you would like to gain both individually and for your coach partnership.

References and further reading

Haarhoff, B. & Thwaites, R. (2016). *Reflection in CBT*. London: Sage.

Kovacs, L & Corrie, S (2016) Building reflective capability to enhance coaching practice. *The Coaching Psychologist*, Vol. 13, No. 1, June 2017