

Look Back To Move Forwards (Better!) Reflective Practice For Coaches and Leaders



Doug Cooper asks coaches to seek improvement by critical assessment of their coaching practice...

Why?

How do we get better as a coach or leader, how do we achieve 'expertise' in what we do? Clearly we have to do it a lot to become experienced – deliberate practice is essential in developing a skill; but to actually get better we need to reflect on what we have done, unpick why it worked/didn't work and then implement changes/understanding. In other words we need to 'Look back to move forwards – in a better way'. So it is not just experience that is important, it is experience and reflection. Gilbert & Trudel (2006) take this one stage further by suggesting: "10 years of coaching [leading] without reflection is simply one year of coaching (leading) ten times."

So the question is how long have you actually been coaching or leading, 10 years or perhaps just one? If we can appreciate the value in undertaking some form of reflective practice we need to consider when we do it and more importantly how we make it purposeful.

When?

For most the answer to this question would be 'after the coaching/leadership has taken place', with the idea of mulling it over while driving home or perhaps at home with the feet up in front of the fire.

This would be classified as 'retrospective reflection on-action' by Donald Schön (1983) who is arguably the godfather of reflective practice. Yes this is a critical part of the process, but surprisingly to some I would argue not the most important from a paddlesport coach/leader's perspective. Here are three other key times to consider 'thinking backwards to move forwards'.

Reflection For-Action

This is when you are planning what to do in your session. The best plans do not come out of thin air, they are mulled over and thought about for some time in your head. During this process you will no doubt be thinking about what you have done in the past, to help shape what you plan to do in your next session.

This is a key part of the reflective process, it is those experiences from the past that MUST be drawn upon to develop what is best to do in the future. They then allow you to anticipate what to expect and how the session may evolve.

Key question – How much time do you allow for planning things through in your head and how much of the plan is based around shaping previous events to help you anticipate what is going to happen?

Reflection In-Action

This is our 'in the moment thinking', often it will be happening in a fast and furious way and many would suggest that we can become quite 'intuitive' in the decisions we make as a coach or leader. What fuels this thinking and an associated decision is in fact reflection, and it is this kind of in-action reflection that I would argue is vital for the dynamic environment of paddlesport coaching.

As 'intuitive' as it may seem, all we are doing is constantly monitoring and noticing whether what we are seeing is what we are expecting based on our experience (previous actions) and what we have planned (reflection for action). If we do not notice anything untoward, then perhaps nothing needs to happen, however as soon as we notice something that does not match what we expect – we will start to make changes. As you will be well aware, in any paddlesport coaching or leading situation constant changes are often required – the quality of these changes are all down to the quality of our in-action reflection.

Key question – How good are you at 'noticing', is there constant monitoring happening and do you have a 'red flag system' when things start to go differently to what you would anticipate?

Reflection On-Action

Similar to retrospective reflection on-action as already discussed, the reflective thinking for this happens in slow time where space has been created and some in-depth thought is possible. The difference however is that this thinking time is happening during the action, time has been purposefully created to 'press pause' and reflect on how things are going, then there is the opportunity to 'press play' and instigate some changes based on the reflective thought process. This could be by making time during a lunch break to think things over, or perhaps identify some 'key places' during a leadership journey where the pause button will be pressed before making a decision.

Key question: How much time do you create for yourself to reflect on-action, do have identified 'key places' when leading where you press pause before making a decision?

How?

Creating time

For purposeful reflective practice to happen, time is the essential ingredient (apart from in-action reflection). Create time and space that allows you to think, then create an environment (quiet, comfortable, relaxing etc) that suits your needs. If with a group let them know what is happening, perhaps involve them in the process – it could be essential time for them as well.

Asking the right question

When you have time to reflect it is all about asking yourself the right questions, the type of question that will make the reflection purposeful as opposed to just recounting what happened. Consider the following three questions:

What?

- 1 Went on;
- 2 Did you notice;
- 3 Were the groups reactions.

So What?

- 1 Were the effects
- 2 Was positive
- 3 Was unexpected

Now What?

- 1 Needs to change to alter an outcome
- 2 Might you do differently next time

Noticing

To notice is the key element of reflection in-action when we do not have time to ask the questions of our actions. It is the ability to take note of things that could so easily be ignored or missed. It is so much more than just observing, it is about hearing, seeing, feeling and sensing and of course it should be interactive and involve those being coached or led. This is just the start of it though as it is then about using our mind, it is about checking and challenging what we are noticing with what we were expecting or anticipating. It relies on comparing previous experiences with the current, or the current with the anticipated or hoped for outcome. To really notice requires a lot of expertise – and we know how that is evolved!

Get Help!

When asking ourselves the key reflective questions sooner or later our personal coaching repertoire of experience or personal coaching creativity will draw a blank – getting help is essential in the reflective process. Here's some avenues help may be available to us:

Coaching/leading materials

- 1 Books, articles etc

Advice seeking

- 1 A critical friend
- 2 A mentor
- 3 A more senior member of staff/club member

Joint construction

- 1 Working things through with the group
- 2 Chatting with a group of peers
- 3 Friends in the pub

Summary

For us to continue developing our expertise then it would appear 'just doing it' will not help, we need to use our brains as well – a bit of purposeful reflection is perhaps the road to expertise. This does not just happen after the event has come and gone – to really make the most of our reflective powers we must utilise them before, in the heat of the moment and by creating time during the event. The more dynamic the situation the more important these three times to reflect become. How we do it will take practice, creating time is essential, asking the right questions critical, noticing is at the heart of the 'in the heat of the moment stuff' and getting help is the only way we will find the solutions we are aspiring for. This all considered we hopefully will all be in a better place to be able to 'look back and keep moving forward' – towards expertise!

CRAFT SURE

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