Self-Reflection: The Teacher is Within

The Teacher is Within

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After a colleague and I talked over some issues with which I was struggling, we were both silent for a long time. Then, he broke the silence by asking, "How does he feel about that?" I was shocked at the form of his question and its effect on me. My friend was asking how I felt. By using the pronoun "he," he caused me to observe myself from a distance to answer his question.

That conversation illustrates an important principle of learning—the most useful feedback is self-observation.

A revolution in the cognitive sciences is bringing a broader, more balanced, and penetrating view of what supports learning. Feedback is becoming suspect, praise comes with a price tag of dependency, and "constructive criticism" in workshops causes participants to extinguish the very skills they are there to learn.

What's Wrong With External Feedback?

Feedback coming from a source external to the learner has as many negative results as positive. Add judgments to the feedback—good or bad—and the counterproductive effects multiply.

Sanford (1995) reports that feedback reduces the capabilities of self-reflection and self-assessment, reinforces the pattern that others will and should tell us how we are doing, and reduces our capacity to be self-reflective and self-accountable. Her work cites applications with 9- and 10-year-olds and adults in a private sector work setting.

Praise has always been considered appropriate for shaping some simple learnings and behaviors, for working with very young children, or training animals. However, questions linger about using praise as psychological candy. In one classic classroom study, Mary Budd Rowe (1974) found that elementary students who were frequently praised by their teachers showed less persistence than their peers.

Kohn (1993) reported on two other research studies. One found that praise does not correlate with student achievement gains. The other concluded that correlation between teachers' rates of

praise and students' learning gains are not always positive; even when correlations are positive, they are usually too low to be significant.

Staff developers will remember that Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers introduced "peer coaching" to schools in the early 1980s. That was based on their hypothesis that coaching, following initial training, would result in much greater transfer than training alone. But, in 1996, Joyce and Showers discarded two concepts from their original model and in their place proposed the following two ideas.

1. **Do not provide verbal feedback.** "We have found it necessary and important to omit verbal feedback as a coaching component." "When teachers try to give one another feedback, collaborative activity tends to disintegrate. Peer coaches told us they found themselves slipping into 'supervisory, evaluative comments' despite their intentions to avoid them." (Joyce & Showers, 1996, p. 15). When feedback is perceived as evaluative (good or bad), it does not help teacher growth.
2. **Recognize that the observing person does not necessarily have to have more expertise in the area being observed than the teacher.**

A New Practice

Sanford (1995) reports that when teachers continually asked 9- and 10-year-olds to reflect on how well their behaviors matched a stated procedure, the average child in the beginning could not report accurately on his or her own behavior. As the teachers continued to ask for reflection, they gave neither feedback nor outside evidence. Within weeks, the students' reflections became increasingly accurate.

Similarly, when working with adults my colleagues and I find applications of this self-reflection principle in three settings. First, in Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994) seminars, we are discovering that teachers experience as much growth from post-lesson reflections conferences with peers without an observation as with one. Cognitive Coaching is modifying teachers' capacity for self-modification. Second, in seminars designed to develop skills, mediating for self-reflection is producing data, discoveries, and behavior change. Finally, in work teams, personal reflection followed by mediated conversation with group members is leading to rapid improvements in group effectiveness.

How It Works in Staff Development

Three elements seem to be necessary to support self-reflection as a feedback device in training sessions.

1. **Provide a safe environment for self-reflection.** Safety is enhanced when participants know (a) no external evaluation will be employed, (b) the work's purpose is self-

reflective growth, and (c) they can select the focus for development. Furthermore, participants own the interpretation and use the data.
Comfort, however, does not equate safety. Our greatest growth comes from operating outside our comfort levels. Effective environments will also include a rationale for self-reflection. Participants will engage more willingly in self-reflection when they know about the results of these processes.

2. **Provide some structure for self-reflection.** Provide some form of map or conversational template to guide participants' interaction. Just as peer coaches profit from having a scaffold to work within, some simple maps offering conversational guides and constraints are useful for workshop participants employing self-reflection and work group members using "group coaching." These templates must be taught to work groups but can be held in the minds of the presenter in workshop settings and can be offered step by step as needed.
3. **Use appropriate tools for self-reflection.** The most important conversational tools supporting self-reflection are those used in the classroom to encourage thinking. These approaches include the absence of expressions of judgment by a partner, pausing, paraphrasing, inquiring in open-ended manners, and providing data that is interference free.

Applications in a Workshop

To mediate is to shine a flashlight of consciousness on data. Examining the data may lead to self-directed learning. Mediational questions invite the discovery of insights and the making of meaning, cause complex thinking and reflection, are open ended, are nonjudgmental, and focus on self-directed learning. Mediational questions can be posed by the presenter as these examples illustrate:

- What went on in your mind when_____?
- How did/do you know that?
- What do you notice about your posture, facial muscles, and attitude of your chin when you spoke using the two different inflectional patterns?
- What assumptions do you hold on this topic. What data do you have that sup[ports those assumptions, and what inferences are you making about the data?

A presenter can also offer flashlight talk for partners to speak in skills-building exercises.

- Tell your partner what they did that helped establish trust and contribute to your thinking.
- Tell your partner what you were paying attention to in this interaction and describe how that information informed your choices and behavior.

Applications in a Meeting

Group coaching is a technique Bruce Wellman and I have been testing. It is designed to accelerate group development by focusing attention on group member perceptions, decision-making processes about participation, and the impact of these perceptions and decisions on the group. The following approach provides a structure for group coaching in which each group member becomes more conscious of their own decisions.

Initially, a group coach performs two roles. The first is to gather data during the meeting. The coach observes some element of group interaction agreed upon by the group. For example, the coach might record the frequency with which members demonstrate a particular collaborative norm (paraphrasing, inquiring, or putting ideas on the table). The coach's second role is to provide a structured means for members to reflect on their meeting participation and on the data gathered.

The following six steps can then be used during a meeting.

1. The group determines what data the coach should collect during a meeting or work session and the form for recording the data.
2. The coach observes and gathers data during the meeting. Depending on the complexity of the data-gathering procedures, the coach may participate in the meeting or remain silent.
3. When the data-gathering is over, the coach initiates private reflection regarding each member's participation decisions during the meeting. The coach might say, "Take a minute and reflect on the decisions you made about participating in this meeting—when to speak, when to stay silent, how to interact—and on how those decisions influenced the group."
4. After members have had time to reflect, the coach invites metacognitive conversation. In this conversation, the coach asks mediative questions, paraphrases members' responses, probes, clarifies, and inquires about members' thinking.
5. The coach then focuses the group on the specific area of data gathering they had requested. This is done by asking group members to recall and reflect on their own perception of the data. Several alternatives are now available.

   In many cases no treatment of the coach's data is necessary or desired by the group. From my reading of the Sanford research cited earlier, I am encouraged to believe this is all that is necessary. However, I have taken a perhaps less-than-bold step with groups and invited them to have the group coach "confirm" perceptions with data, if requested by the group, or to give specific examples of patterns within the group (e.g., four times as many probes as paraphrases, or probes seemed to be preceded by paraphrases) followed by an inquiry like, "What do you make of that?".
6. In a final step, the group coach invites group self-prescription and elicits the group's commitments for collaborative behaviors in the next meeting.

Conclusion

The source of expertise is critical self-reflection. Self-reflection is most valuable if it is done regularly, allowing for skills of self-observation and analysis to be refined and habituated. Regular use can also promote a shift in the norms of the work culture.

A friend of mine, Dave Schumaker, when working as a middle school principal, introduced five minutes of protected time for journal writing at the beginning of each staff meeting. Initially, teachers groaned. But after a while, they demanded it if the reflection time was overlooked.

Reflection need not take much time. In fact, many staffs with which we are working are adopting a task-reflection ratio for their meetings in which they agree to spend a specific amount of time at each meeting reflecting on how well they are working together.

Because there are always more tasks that time, almost all bright and task-oriented groups resist this notion at first. But, eventually, they realize any group that is too busy to reflect about its work is too busy to improve.

Reference Note

When I mention my colleagues, I primarily refer to associates at the Institute for Intelligent Behavior, a group responsible for the ongoing development of Cognitive Coaching and who are increasingly applying these concepts to organizational development: Bill Baker, Art Costa, John Dyer, Laura Lipton, Peg Luidens, Marilyn Tabor, Bruce Wellman, and Diane Zimmerman. Mark Cary has contributed to the description of group coaching described here.

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