

Putting your practical experience to ongoing use

Embedding your learning using structured reflection and debriefs



Introduction

“You learn something new every day” may be an old saying. But when you sit back and *reflect* on this, it’s very pertinent – especially considering the new information, people and experiences you encounter on a daily basis.

And that’s the key to this process. Allocating time to reflect on your experiences to identify insights and your learning – to see how you can apply these in future.

The need for structured reflective practice

Recent review projects undertaken in the NRM sector of Western Australia revealed:

- Significant staff turnover
- Low levels of resources available for staff development
- Inconsistent knowledge management systems
- Loss of ‘corporate knowledge’ through staff turnover

Using a regular and structured reflective process can help deal with the impacts of all of the above issues.

So what is it?

Structured reflective practice is simply using a series of stepwise questions that you can consider and then answer either on your own or with other colleagues and peers. It can take from 15 minutes through to a few hours to complete. It depends on the complexity and significance of the issues experienced.

Benefits of structured reflection

In organisations experiencing significant staff turnover it can be a vital tool to ensure that the ‘expertise’ of staff members stays within the organisation long after they have gone. It will help you to:

- Better understand what you’ve experienced
- Document and apply what you’ve learnt
- Enable others in your organisations to learn from your experience as well

The TRIP debrief model

This four step model can be used either individually or with a team to help build a stronger understanding of your experiences and see how these can be built upon in future.

The four stages involve consideration and discussion of:

- **The facts** (observations; numbers; data)
- **Reactions** (feelings of frustration; challenges experienced; likes; dislikes)
- **Insights** (what you learnt; what it means for you now)
- **Planning** (what you’ll do from now on as a result of this experience)

The TRIP process is a kind of filtering process. It is intended to gather data, relate it to people’s emotions, identify its meaning and finally, encourage new decisions.

For example, staff involved in field work could use the process after each series of site visits. If undertaking an individual reflection it may involve working through the questions shown in the following table. I’ve included some (example) responses to help highlight the value of the process.

Reflection Stage	My responses
The facts	
How many observations did we take?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sixty
What area did this cover?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 208 km²
Who was involved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Me, neighbouring NRMO and two volunteers
Reactions	
What were my frustrations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organising a team of three others • Having to explain observation process several times • Having limited time to do the observations
What was satisfying about the work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting the job done
Insights	
What did I learn from the field work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technically – the impacts of a prolonged dry period are not as bad as predicted in the modelling • Other– difficult to expect people to have same technical understanding as me without the same level of training
How has this related to my project aims?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still on track and may see more people involved if I develop better training methods
Plan	
What can I change for future field work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand people’s technical skills <i>before</i> doing fieldwork • Have desktop scoping work completed well in advance

Can you see how the process unfolds? The four steps are designed to help you consider your experience from different perspectives. This overcomes our natural tendency to jump in and develop a better approach or solution straight away. Often we do this without having taken into account the factors that contributed to the ‘problem’ in the first place.

More examples are shown in the following tables to help you understand how you can use the process yourself.

Reflection on a landholder meeting

Reflection Stage	Responses
The facts	
What process did the meeting follow (planned/haphazard)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There was a lack of structure & unclear agenda
What were the key issues discussed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My role in supporting the landholders Technical support available Funding Future projects
Reactions	
What issues gave me cause for concern?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Landholders don't appear to have grasped new funding model They're still expecting full one to one service
What was I uncomfortable with?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They're blaming my bosses for the changes
Insights	
What impact could this have on my role?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stretched beyond capacity to deliver
Plan	
What do I need to do from here on?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify my role & responsibilities Identify options to partner with others to deliver services landholders want

Reflection on a field trip

Reflection Stage	Responses
The facts	
At what point did participants start to interact?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During the discussion on GM crop trials in the region at McHuck's Vineyard
What were the key issues discussed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impacts of GM crops on other regional businesses Potential impacts of reduced fertiliser & chemical use Water quality
Reactions	
What were the main challenges of the trip?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initially getting people interacting Keeping everyone moving – making sure we got to each site on time Then closing off some of the discussions!
What was my highlight?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People asking when the next one was scheduled for!
Insights	
What did I learn about running field trips?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Once people get talking (and listening) they can really learn a lot from each other (without needing me to direct the conversation)
Plan	
What can I change for future trips?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be realistic on number of sites & issues to cover Continue to involve participants in the planning to ensure field trip meets an identified need

The responses from each of these reflections could also be shared with supervisors, managers or colleagues to assist them in their understanding of similar issues. Taking this further, the debriefs could be done at a team meeting to help develop the shared or 'corporate' knowledge of your organisation.

Using the TRIP debrief model with teams

The TRIP model is designed to help turn a shared group experience or event into a decision or commitment from group members.

The success of the model still relies on it being a stepwise process. This allows time to consider the main issues, as well as reflection on an issue as relates it to people's own experiences. Remember, it overcomes the temptation of people to move straight towards the change required without considering some of the options, impacts or relevancy of the change. It can also help overcome the dominance of the more boisterous members of your team.

How can it be used?

The flexibility of the model enables it to be used as a basis to run a group discussion, debrief or reflection. It can also be used as a planning tool or feedback tool.

Components of the process

As indicated, the process moves participants through four planned stages as described below.

Stage	Intention
The facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get participants to focus on a shared experience (eg field day or tour) Identification of facts – reinforce what happened
Reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get participants to think about how they reacted to specific parts of the event Get participants to think about how they felt
Insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Link the event to what participants have gained or learnt Explore how the issue/s could be applied in participants own workplace or environment Gain agreement on the meaning of the issue
Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify what needs to change; what should be done differently in the future

Guidelines for running the process with a team

Preparation – purpose of the debrief

The first step in designing any debrief process is to identify why you are doing it. What is the purpose for running the process? Identify why you are running it and what you hope to achieve. What do you want the group to learn from it? Eg for a debrief on a team building exercise, the purpose could be ‘helping the group to recognise how they communicate’.

Preparation – developing questions

- Your questions should be specific to the event or topic being discussed
- Make sure the questions used are ones that you could answer yourself
- Look at how you can ask questions in different ways
- Always ask open-ended questions

Stage	Purpose	What to ask
The facts	Getting data.	What they remembered re <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sights or images • Sounds or words • People or objects • Steps taken
Reactions	Finding out how they feel. How they found themselves reacting to specific events or issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was good or bad • What they liked or disliked • What excited or surprised them • What was their highlight or lowlight
Insights	Discover the meaning for the group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have they learnt • What does this mean for them • How does it relate to their own experience • How can it be applied
Plan	Identify what decisions will be made	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What they will do differently • What they will change; • How they will approach things in the future

Preparation – number of questions

Remember, the TRIP process is a kind of filtering process. As part of the filtering process, your questions need to help people to progress through each stage. You are helping them to converge on one point – the plan. Thus the number of questions at each stage should be equal to or less than the previous stage, ending with one question at the planning stage.

Identify your final ‘planning’ question first. This should closely match your purpose. Once you have written your planning question, the other stages should direct the discussion towards it.

The design sheet (Appendix 1) was used to debrief a team building exercise. (Team members were blindfolded and had to complete a jigsaw – true!) The design sheet shows how you can develop questions to converge on a decision or change that the group can make. Note that the design sheet also contains an ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ section. This is to let people know what process (ie discussion) you are about to take them through, how long it will take and why. It also shows the time allowed for each section of the discussion.

A blank design sheet (Appendix 2) has also been included for your own use. Recording outcomes Responses from the ‘insight’ and ‘plan’ sections are the most pertinent. They identify the key learnings and where these will take the group in the future. Write these up as a record of the conversation.

The following table provides a list of example questions for each stage of the TRIP process

Sample debrief questions

The facts	Reactions	Insights	Plan
- What scenes do you remember?	- What was the highlight of the day for you?	- What are the key messages?	- What changes will we need to make?
- What grabbed your attention?	- How did you react at this moment?	- What have you learnt today?	- What will we need to do differently?
- What did you hear people saying?	- What did you like about the event?	- What have you learnt about yourself?	- What will be the first steps?
- What sounds did you hear?	- What did you dislike?	- How does this relate to your own workplace/situation?	- What needs to happen from here?
- What did you see?	- What got you excited?	- What are the key take home messages?	- How can we improve our performance?
- What did you do?	- When were you frustrated?	- What does this mean to you?	- How can we apply what we have learnt?
- What procedures were followed?	- How did you feel when the activity was completed?	- What impact could this have?	
- What were our sales figures for last month?	- What concerns do you have?	- How does this compare to previous figures?	
- How many people visited the park this week?			
- How many vehicles were on the beach over summer?			
- What species of fish were caught in this area in the last year?			

Appendix 1. Example planning sheet

Purpose: Help the group to recognise how they communicate

The Facts	Reactions	Insights	Plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What did you hear people saying? - What did you do? - What process did the group follow? <p>(4 mins)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did you feel when blindfolded? - How did you react to all the noise? - How did you feel when the challenge was completed? <p>(3 mins)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What have you learnt about yourself and the way you communicate? - What did you learn about teamwork and communication in the group? <p>(5 mins)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can we apply what we have learnt to improve our communication skills? <p>(5 mins)</p>

Appendix 2. TRIP design template

Purpose:

The facts	Reaction	Insights	Plan

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