Reflective Practice for coaches

the power of reflection for coaches and all professionals

What is Reflective Practice?

Reflective practice is about looking back and reflecting upon an experience that has occurred during practice. It encourages reflection and thoughts about what happened, decisions that were made, actions that were taken and the consequences of those decisions and actions. *And crucially, in coaching work, it is important to do this before, within and after coaching sessions.* Reflective Practice can be described as:

- reflection before action
- reflection in action
- reflection on reflection in action
- reflection after action

A useful definition is:

"A mental process of thinking about what we have done, learned and experienced..."
Professor Jenny Moon, teaching expert and author, 1999.

Reflective practice is the process that turns experience into knowledge. Reflection is described as a form of problem solving that is used to resolve issues, in a practical context this simply looks like, "Why did this occur in my session?". This can often be seen in professionals who rely on tacit knowledge to form most of their understanding, they know how to do something, but often they do not know why they are doing it.

In simple terms Reflective Practice means:

- Learning to pay attention – listening to ourselves
- Coming face to face with our assumptions
- Noticing patterns
- Changing what we see
- Changing the way we see.

Donald Schön is one of the most well-known people to have written about Reflective Practice and his model, from an article in 1983 is shown below.



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Why does it matter?

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development comment that - "Reflective Practice is the foundation of all professional development; it makes meaning from experience and transforms insights into practical strategies for personal growth and organisational impact. It involves integrating activities into daily life on a routine basis which raise awareness, prompt critical analysis and aid self-management and decision-making."

This comment makes it clear that all professionals should be engaging in Reflective Practice. For coaches this is a particular requirement as writing a critical reflection on a piece of coaching is a key part of the Association for Coaching's accreditation process.

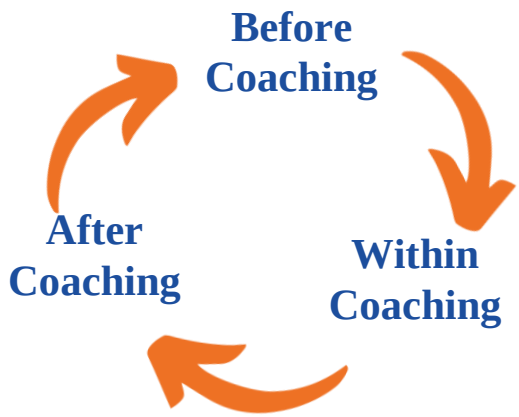
The benefits of doing Reflective Practice

Doing Reflective Practice regularly and with commitment offers a wide variety of benefits. The most important are shown below:

- Strong sense of my coaching *context and field*
- Improved awareness of *how* I coach
- Greater appreciation of the *effects* of my coaching
- Increased ability to *assess* and *critique* my coaching
- More *choice* about how I coach
- *Enhanced understanding of psychological factors*
- Investment in my Continual Professional *Development*
- *Preparedness* for accreditation / re-accreditation

When to do Reflective Practice?

Here is a model that illustrates that Reflective Practice can be done Before an event, Within an event and then After an Event. The model uses coaching as the example and any other professional setting could replace coaching.



Before

It is vital to go into a coaching session well prepared.

Things to consider are:

- Outcomes from previous session
- How I felt about the last session
- How I want to be in this session – my state
- What are my expectations and feelings about the session?
- What has happened since the last session and how might this influence my state
- Is the location and environment as hoped for/expected?
- Review any notes or particular ideas in preparation

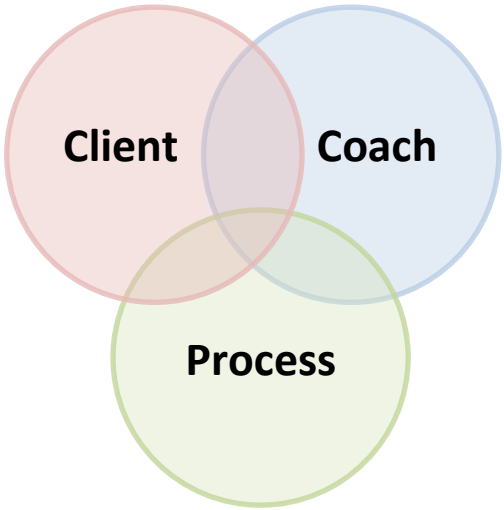
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Within

Some people may find this concept difficult to understand as they feel it might take away their focus or attention from the client or situation in hand. However, we believe it is essential to have some small part of our brain and awareness paying attention to how we are, what is happening between us and what am I noticing about myself as well as what am I noticing about the client or the immediate situation that I face. We think of this like having a camera looking over our shoulder and I am able to see feedback from the camera image as I go along. This can also be considered using 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th positions (a





concept from NLP). This idea of the
camera looking over our shoulder is a little like seeing things from 3rd and 4th positions at the same time. Being able to take note of what is happening, make judgements about what to do using this information is really valuable. We also need to balance and reflect on the needs of the Client, Ourselves and the Process we are using at the time. This can be shown using the image shown above.

Observations we make about the coaching process itself:

- where we are in the coaching structure (opening out or closing in)
- whether the coaching process is "on track"
- apparent success of interventions offered
- "aha" moments
- progress of the coaching session in the time available
- progress made over the course of the coaching contract
- the sense of psychological safety in the room

Observations we make with regard to the client:

- language used
- beliefs expressed
- way of expressing themselves
- their energy - and how it shifts
- how they are receiving our interactions
- the direction of their thinking - "aha" moments
- their body language
- their eye movement
- what is not being said

Observations we make about ourselves as coaches:

- what is not being said
- our energy
- our presence (our voice / tone/ body language)

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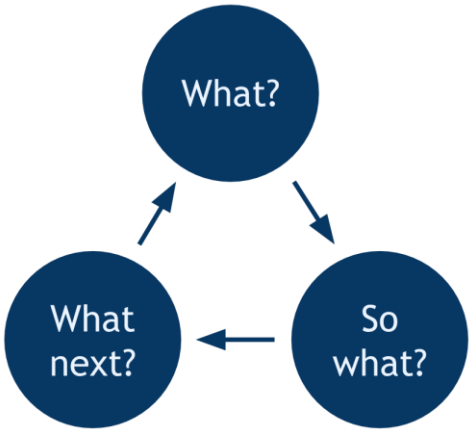
- our thoughts about the client, about ourselves and the coaching process
- our way of engaging (building rapport)
- our physical comfort
- our level of inner comfort with what is unfolding
- the quality of our listening
- how well we remain in the "Now"

After

After a coaching session is when most people consider Reflective Practice. Further into this handout we will explore the "When" after a session. To begin with it is helpful to consider two meta-questions (taking a high level or broad view)

1. Is this analysis or description?

2. Am I exploring depth and breadth?



Good Reflective Practice explores what happened in depth as well as breadth and is more concerned with ideas like "So what?" "What if?" " I wonder about..", "What could have been different?" rather than simple description of what happened. The diagram highlights this point and together with the questions below enables me to learn from what happened and considering what might have been done differently or what I might do differently next time.

- What was happening?
- What could I have done differently?
- What did I miss or choose not to respond to?
- What was the basis of some of my choices?
- What other possibilities did I have?
- How might I "be" rather than what would I "do"?
- What did I notice at the time and did I lose my way at any time?
- How might I apply what I have noticed or had insights about?
- Imagine re-running the session?

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The Alchemy Tools – 120 ideas, techniques, models and suggestions for development
Reflective Practice – a Handout. Available from Alchemy of Coaching www.alchemyofcoaching.com

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