
Reflecting on the past

How can we use the power of self-reflection to learn, improve and genuinely change our own behaviours and mindset?

The concept of self-reflection has been in existence for more than 3,000 years, yet many of us do not utilise its benefits on a regular basis. Used in the right way, self-reflection can offer all of us a method of self-coaching, critique and improvement – all on offer at no cost and with no other individuals involved!

There are however, some frequent pitfalls and problems that we often create for ourselves when self-reflecting. Understanding and recognising these is important if we are genuinely able to make the most of our reflective capabilities.

What exactly is Self-Reflection?

Although the words provide a simple indication – reflecting on oneself, the complexities, methods, and application are largely underestimated. Furthermore, self-reflection can be undertaken in different ways but still provide value to the reflector.

As the name suggests, self-reflection involves a period of reflecting on one's behaviours, communication, feelings and responses to others' actions. As an accountant, you are likely to interact with a wide range of individuals and groups including staff members, customers, and government officials. How you respond during these interactions is not only important in terms of achieving what you need in your role as an accountant, but also whether you continue to build and enhance the relationship.

Self-reflection provides an opportunity to reconsider something that has already happened. This may focus on our behaviours or those of others. It may cover what we said or didn't say, or perhaps whether we responded emotionally to an event.

It is important to make the distinction between considering appropriateness and post-rationalising how you have behaved, usually after receiving feedback. Self-reflection is not about presenting ourselves with an argument that justifies how we behaved. Instead, it is an opportunity to explore the benefits and drawbacks around how you have behaved, whilst considering and challenging the relevance of your own beliefs, values and experience.

Ultimately, self-reflection involves taking a balanced perspective on how you have acted, rather than focusing extensively on either positive or negative behaviours. The rationale for such a balanced approach is that your behaviours are unlikely to be all positive or negative yet adopting such an approach is likely to constrain your thinking towards either end of the spectrum.

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How should I Self-Reflect?

There are no set rules around how someone should self-reflect. Some of us find that a quiet environment is ideal for a period of reflection, whereas others reflect 'in the moment' during a conversation with others.

This relies largely on how we are feeling at the time, and the environment that will best support the emotion being experienced. Notwithstanding the above points, some of my clients have asked for further guidance on self-reflection,

and I have asked them to consider the following questions / points:

- **When to reflect** – careful planning or when it feels right?

Similar to other commitments, self-reflection time can be planned in advance and given a regular time slot in your diary. At the beginning, a short diary commitment (such as ten minutes per week) should suffice until you feel comfortable in reflecting more often. If you find that ten minutes is insufficient, increase the time available during your next reflection exercise.



Perhaps however, you prefer to work more spontaneously. If this is the case, a series of short, unplanned reflection exercises might be more effective – reflecting when you feel it is required, which then includes longer break periods until the next phase of reflection exercises.

Regardless of whether you prefer to plan ahead or not, the more frequently you self-reflect, the more likely it is that you will continue the activity over a longer period of time.

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- **Where** to self-reflect?

Although it may not seem like an important consideration, choosing the right environment for your self-reflection is just as important as how to undertake it.

Furthermore, finding the right environment will also offer encouragement for more frequent self-reflection activity.

As accountants, we spend most of our working day either in a professional environment, such as offices or meeting rooms, or in more recent times, at home.

This environment may or may not provide the optimum place to self-reflect, and this will vary from individual to individual. It is important however, to find an environment that encourages a feeling of calmness, rather than stress or frustration; this will typically provide more effective self-reflection results.

The key thing here is that the environment works for you, enabling you to enter into a period of useful and thought-provoking self-reflection. This could be somewhere like your local coffee shop, or even during exercise.

Another important consideration is whether to reflect alone, in collaboration with another individual,

or as a group. These approaches can work in different ways, depending on whether individuals feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts (and feelings) in front of others. There are also benefits and potential drawbacks of each approach, with the possibility for ‘groupthink’ when reflecting as a group or team. Groupthink (Janis, 1972) occurs when irrational decisions are made due to the need for individuals to conform or discourage disagreement. It is possible therefore that instead of challenging one’s reflections or beliefs, other members could agree with their perspective simply to maintain harmony within the group.

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- **What** to self-reflect?

Good self-reflection is about thinking and challenging yourself. This means questioning your own actions and how these may have been perceived by others.

As accountants, we are usually effective at following rules, which can be good for creating routine and predictable outcomes. When these outcomes fail to materialise, we often focus on other factors as the cause of the failure (such as other individuals or another ‘factor’), rather than examine our own behaviours.

Try using open, inward-focused questions to start your self-reflection. Some examples might include:

- What do I believe went well during my recent interactions with X? Why do I believe this is the case?
- What could I have improved if I was to interact with X again in the future? Why?
- What was it about my behaviours or feelings that I can remember most clearly about the interaction?
- Am I comfortable with these behaviours or feelings?
- What do I believe about the interaction that is definitely true? How do I know this?





As the questions above indicate, the starting point is to question yourself and to challenge why you believe this to be the case. You may want to consider a series of specific interactions that you experienced during the past week, such as dealings that you feel have been effective or not effective in some way.

Having worked with many accountants and finance professionals on self-reflection, I generally find that the initial questioning and challenge of oneself is sometimes uncomfortable. However, with practice and through applying a logical, process driven approach to reflection, most accountants find self-reflection techniques extremely valuable.

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Repeat...and get curious!

Like all of our automatic actions and behaviours, the habit of self-reflection can be formed with enough repetition. Many of our habits are created due to an emotional driver. Interestingly, this is one of the reasons why we don't form 'better' habits that we know we should – there tends to be an emotional attachment to another habit, that is often easier or more rewarding.

Self-reflection therefore has the benefit (and the disadvantage) that it is not an emotional process – it is based on rational, logical thought. This means that there is no compelling reason to create (or avoid) such a habit.

However, the act of thinking is something that we all do, and self-reflection simply forms part of our thinking activities. One of the key differences however, relates to what we are thinking about, and whether we are using the results to consider how we might act differently in the future.

If you find yourself disinterested in self-reflection, curiosity might help. What are you genuinely curious about, and how might self-reflection provide some of the answers you are seeking? For example, maybe you reacted in an irrational manner during a recent conversation, or made a decision that you later regret. Become curious about the reaction and the decision making – what can you learn about the experience that you can change, adapt or do something about in the future?

Ben's top tips for self-reflection:

- **Keep it simple**

If you have recently begun your self-reflection journey, try to keep your reflections simple – at least in the beginning. Too many thoughts, self-challenge and reconsideration of the past can be overwhelming, so try to start off slow and increase the frequency and depth of your reflections over time.

- **Right Place, Right Time**

Discover the right environment that works for you. This could be quiet or noisy, surrounded by people, or totally isolated – there are no rules, other than finding an environment that helps you feel calm, rather than stressed or frustrated.

- **Strike a balance**

Good self-reflection involves taking a balanced perspective. This could relate to you or others, but it is important not to polarise individuals into 'good' or 'bad'.

- **Get Curious**

Curiosity can be useful for challenging your own thoughts and ideas around a particular concept or problem. Using this approach during your self-reflection can also offer opportunities for genuine behavioural change and improvement.

- **Remember, it's ALWAYS free!**

In a world where professional coaching, training and development are frequently used, self-reflection offers a unique alternative that relies exclusively on the information you hold in your brain. No payment necessary either!