

Right about now, coaches are assessing what they have achieved this year with their teaching colleagues and projecting their expectations for next year. Along with this reflection is the realization that what they anticipated doing may not be exactly what they actually did. That balance is often elusive... we make the blueprints for our work in the schedules we design and try to adhere to our own recommendations for the work we want to accomplish but we all know that life intervenes and in Robert Burns' words... *the best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry* ... ("To a Mouse," 1785).

Reflection is critical for growth. It is an exploration and self-assessment of one's thoughts, words, and actions. It is a way for each practitioner to examine his/her beliefs and how those beliefs have influenced behaviors, ultimately leading to positive change. At the elbow of reflective practice is reflective learning – internally examining and studying some issue that was triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and results in a changed conceptual perspective (*Reflective Learning: Key to Learning from Experience*, Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Spring 1983). So what does this mean? It means that being a reflective practitioner offers an opportunity to become a reflective learner... that one learns from social, emotional, and practical experiences. Together, those experiences shape a person's conduct. What a coach thinks and believes, based on perceptions and experiences, sculpts how that coach will approach a coaching interaction. Those perceptions become reality and that's what creates a reaction and often, an opinion.

Coaches must be a believer of process and not trapped by the singleness of action; they must adopt the stance that coaching is a product of ongoing discussions, transparent communication, and most of all, unblemished by ego!

So we know that being reflective helps us grow personally and professionally but why is that important to our coaching practice? Reflection helps each individual:

1. a) better understand one's own strengths and weaknesses
2. b) identify and question one's underlying values and beliefs
3. c) acknowledge and challenge assumptions on which one's ideas, feelings and actions are based
4. d) recognize areas of potential bias or discrimination
5. e) acknowledge one's fears
6. f) identify possible inadequacies or areas for improvement

Nothing mentioned above is new or innovative. In fact, we are probably quite adept at understanding how reflective practice and reflective learning influence teaching and learning. But what about the conditions that support reflective learning? Have we spent time thinking about that? Monash University (www.monash.edu) in Australia has devoted some time in thinking about reflective learning. They believe that reflection works most effectively when the following conditions exist:

1. a) Preparation – when one enters into a new experience, try to identify opportunities for reflection
2. b) Understanding – one needs to know what the goals and expectations of critical reflection are
3. c) Time to stop and think
4. d) A level of objectivity about self and the impact of one's actions
5. e) Honesty
6. f) An open, non-defensive attitude to the experience
7. g) A focus on the deeper levels of meaning – moral, ethical, social and/or professional issues (Branch & Paranjape, 2002) in addition to an emotional response

As we reflect on this year's goals and accomplishments, remember to celebrate the achievements no matter how small; focus on being non-judgmental and receptive to all ideas; be transparent, flexible, respectful, and "ego-less"; and recognize the value of learning together with your colleagues.

Have a wonderful summer. See you in September energized and ready to be a "mover and shaker" with your colleagues!

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