



# Boosting Your Professional Intelligence



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## 1 | Boosting Your Professional Intelligence

Securing better performance is a central challenge for today's professionals. The key to achieving this yourself - and encouraging others to do the same - is to keep making small improvements in what you do. And the secret to constant improvement is to learn how to think more intelligently about your job.

Being an intelligent professional requires you to reflect on your role. Reflection is the vital difference between whether you go on doing the things in the same way, or discover how to do them better and keep up with best practice.

## 2 | Why is reflection the key to professional intelligence?

Reflection helps you to think intelligently about your role because it entails analysing and evaluating your professional practice.

It involves thinking about:

### A. The content of what you do.

A doctor might read about a new treatment and reflect on how to apply it. An accountant might study new tax legislation and consider the implications for the company. A leader might think about the dynamics of the team. They are all seeking to be intelligent about what they do.

### B. The assumptions you make.

This is sometimes known as 'premise reflection'. 'Premise reflection involves us becoming aware of why we perceive, think, feel or act as we do.'<sup>1</sup> It is seen as a high level of reflective thinking because it can change the lens through which you view your role. Asking, 'Why do we have to do it this way?' questions deep-seated assumptions and may produce a different perspective on the task.

### C. The process by which you think.

Do you think most easily by talking out loud, for example? By writing your thoughts down? By going for a walk or listening to music? By being on your own or in discussion with others? Reflecting on how you think will help you to create conditions that enable you to think intelligently.

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<sup>1</sup> David Kember et al, 'Determining the level of reflective thinking from students' written journals using a coding scheme based on the work of Mezirow', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 18(1), 1999, p. 23.)

**Reflection is not:**

- *Habitual action*, which is performed automatically and with little thought.
- *Thoughtful action*, which is the continued use of existing knowledge without asking whether the knowledge should be updated.
- *Introspection*, which is recognising thoughts and feelings within you but without asking whether they are valid.

## 3 | What does reflection involve?

- *Discomfort*, such as ‘This is not working very well’, ‘I could have handled that better’, ‘Others are getting ahead of me’. Curiosity is a form of discomfort - ‘I am not content to accept that things happen. I want to know why.’ You feel restless.
- *Ownership* - in particular, asking ‘What do I need to do about it?’ Taking appropriate personal responsibility is key.
- *Openness* to new information. This includes lateral thinking: being aware of different perspectives and drawing from them. It may involve keeping your mind open for a while.
- *Insight*, expressed as ‘coming together’, for example, or ‘creative synthesis’. It may not be the final answer, but the individual feels comfortable in relation to the issue. The initial discomfort is resolved.
- *Integration* - into your sense of identity. You fit your new attitude, perspective or behaviour into the person you think you already are. Perhaps you recognise similar solutions from your past, how the answer fits with your existing values or how it builds on what you already know. You may sense that you have also changed as a person.
- *Decision* - whether to act on the answer. This includes asking, ‘Would it work - now and in this context?’ ‘What would others think?’ ‘How strongly do I feel about it?’

## 4 | How do I get started?

First, open your eyes to the many things at work that you can reflect on - for example:

- A conversation or meeting: why did it go well/badly? What did it reveal about the relationships between those involved? What role did you play and how effectively? What do you wish you'd said or done differently? What lesson(s) will help you in the future?
- A *critical event*, such as the decision to make someone redundant or to change the strategy. What people were involved? What perspectives did they bring? Where did the power lie and how was it exercised? What was the purpose of the decision? What have you learnt about your colleagues and work situation? How will you use your new insight?
- A *challenge that you face* - anything from coping with a difficult colleague to acquiring a new skill. Do you know what you need to do? Is there someone who can support you in this or give you good advice? What steps must you take to address the challenge?
- *New information or insight* from a professional journal, a conference or a colleague. How does this challenge your own thinking and practice? How might you adapt it to your situation? What support might help you put it into practice?

Then select an event or theme that would energise you if you pondered it more carefully. Don't get overwhelmed by all the things you could reflect on! To acquire the habit of reflection, you might select one issue or topic a week. Or you might chew over a subject till you have exhausted it, and then select another one.

The important thing is to develop a habit that works for you. But it must be a habit. Intelligence comes from repeatedly reflecting on your role.

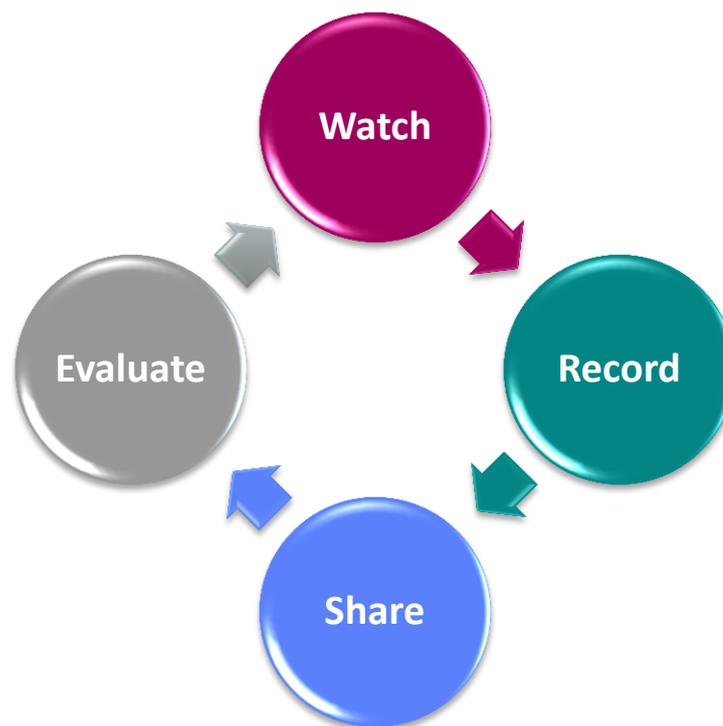
To count for CPD, in some schemes this reflection may need to relate to your learning goals for the year. In which case, you may want to include one or two broad goals that allow you to reflect on a wide range of events (such as 'Learning how to constantly improve in my role').

## 5 | How do I reflect?

You may find our free download: ‘How to do CPD?’ helpful. It contains these two frameworks for reflection:

### 5 | 1 Spontaneous Reflection

Some topics will arise spontaneously from your work, such as the first two bullet points in the list above. You might use a simple framework for reflecting on these:



*Watch* is about keeping alert to, and selecting a topic to reflect on, perhaps because you feel uncomfortable about it.

*Record* involves writing a brief note about what happened, with a couple of sentences about how this has changed your thinking and the difference (if any) it will make to your practice.

*Share* means telling at least one colleague what you have discovered. Send an email, for instance, mention it in a conversation or bring it up at a meeting. Sharing embeds your learning, and increases your value to others.

*Evaluate* what happened. After a while, ask: 'What difference has it made - to me and to my colleagues?' Has it led to any changes in attitude or behaviour? How significant are these changes on a scale of 1-5 (1 is small)?

Don't under-value small changes. An observation ('I've been reading about the cost of conferences') may combine with someone else's comment ('That conference was a waste of time!') to produce a significant change ('Let's go to webinars rather than conferences').

## 5 | 2 Planned Reflection

On other occasions, reflection is more planned - especially when it is designed to address a challenge.



*Identify a challenge* is about recognizing something that makes you dissatisfied and taking responsibility for doing something about it.

*Seek advice* occurs in conversation, most likely with colleagues. ‘Is this something I should make a priority?’ ‘How might I address it?’ ‘Who could give me advice?’ ‘Who has successfully dealt with something similar?’

*Make sense* involves understanding your new knowledge and skills in the context of your daily work, so it makes a difference for you. It means you understand how your new knowledge or capability builds on your existing ones. It results in the moment when you say: “That makes so much sense!”

*Try a response* recognizes that often some trial and error is needed when you put into practice a new insight or skill. Perhaps you have discovered a new classroom strategy, a new engineering technique or a new approach to manage projects. You have to try different ways of applying your knowledge to discover what will work in your situation.

*Tell others* what you have discovered. This will be a strong encouragement to take your reflection seriously 'I'd better not rush this if I am going to report back on it!'

Our free download, ‘How to do CPD - a new model’, describes these approaches more fully.

## 6 | How do I overcome the obstacles?

### Time

Many people are rushed off their feet. They think they don't have time to reflect. The answer may be:

- To identify small pockets of unused time during the day, such as when you are travelling to and from work.
- To create a five-minute window at the start of the working day or the end. If commitments crash in on you the moment you reach your desk, the window could be at home just before you leave for work or immediately you return.
- To carve out dedicated time during the day. You might leave the office for 15 minutes and sit in a café.

The best time to change your routine is when you come back from holiday. Before you are sucked into old habits, introduce your new pattern with its space to think.

### 'I'm not used to thinking like this'

Some people are used to writing scientific and other reports, in which an 'objective' style of writing is employed. This discourages individuals from using their own voices in their writing. Reflection, in which the person's subjective opinion is to the fore, seems alien. Professionals often ask, 'Am I doing it right?'

The answer is that there is no single right way. People with different personalities and experiences will reflect in a different manner.

The key task is to keep asking questions, such as those in the section, 'How do I get started?' Put yourself at the centre of the questions. 'What do I think is going on here?' 'What lessons am I learning?' 'How would I put them into practice?' 'What challenges do I face?' 'What can I do about them?'

Others worry that during the process of reflection, they will uncover things they don't want to know about themselves. Yet researchers have found that this rarely happens.

Participants ‘will intuitively go only to the point at which they are psychologically comfortable.’<sup>2</sup>

### ‘Must I keep a written record?’

It is good practice to record what you are discovering.

- It allows thoughts and ideas to emerge. If you don’t record your reflection, you may rush on to the next thing before your mind has had time to think.
- It gives more opportunity to connect new information to what you already know. You have time to relate bits of new and existing knowledge in creative and surprising ways.
- It helps you to remember. The more completely new information is elaborated, the more easily it will be remembered, retrieved and used.
- It provides an opportunity to think how you will apply your new knowledge to your practice.
- Written observations can form part of your CPD record.

Despite these advantages, you may well think that record-keeping is a chore. This may be because you have a particular form of record keeping in mind. But there is no set way of recording your reflections. So why not think about how you think and find an approach that works for you? For example: why limit yourself to written reflection? Subject to the rules of your scheme, you could:

- Draw a picture or diagram.
- Create an audio record.
- Reflect through meditation or by using the techniques of mindfulness - the ‘record’ becomes imprinted in your mind.

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<sup>2</sup> D. W. Brady, ‘ “What’s Important to You?”: The Use of Narratives to Promote Self-Reflection and To Understand the Experiences of Medical Residents’, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 137 (3), 2002, p. 222.



If you think through writing, why not make this a tool for sharing what you have learnt? Your reflection could take the form of a draft email, or become notes to draw on when you share your observation in a meeting or conversation. It would become more purposeful.

## 7 | How can I maximise the results of my reflection?

By far the best way is to share what you have learnt with one or more colleagues. You can do this through an email, in a conversation, via an online forum or in a formal meeting. A good team leader or employer should create opportunities for staff to share new insights and knowledge.

Sharing what you have discovered will:

- *Motivate you* - 'I'm thinking about this not just for me, but for others.' Sharing (done sensitively!) will make you a more valuable colleague: you will be a source of fresh thinking. You may spark ideas that bring improvements to your workplace. You may gain a reputation for being creative and helpful.
- *Maximise your reflection*. As others respond to your thoughts, your thinking will evolve further. Comment builds upon comment till perhaps a totally unexpected insight emerges. It is a great idea to team up with a trusted colleague or friend, if possible, and reflect as a pair. 'Two minds are better than one.'
- *Multiply reflection* by transmitting knowledge to other people. In many professions, being professional includes encouraging and helping other people to learn. Sharing your ideas and insights shows that you're professional.

Sharing CPD is vital. For many people, CPD is a lonely experience. This is de-motivating and poor educational practice: most people learn best with others. A few simple steps can transform your experience.

## 8 | Key points

- Intelligent professionals reflect on their roles all the time.
- Reflection starts by asking about conversations, critical events, challenges and new information. ‘What can I discover that will help me in my role?’
- Reflection can arise from spontaneous events in the workplace or be planned to meet specific challenges.
- Reflection requires regular, if small chunks of time.
- It involves active thought, whether through writing, drawing a diagram or meditating.
- It should be shared.
- It can lead to continuous improvement.

### About the CPD Futures Project

Led by Dr Michael Moynagh, CPD Futures is a research-based project that is helping to make CPD more fulfilling for professionals and more effective for organisations and the people they serve.

Details can be found at: [www.cpdfutures.com](http://www.cpdfutures.com)