

PAPER
04

Questions for reflection ¹

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Questions for debriefing

“Debriefing” is usually regarded as something done after action, to make the learning from that action more evident.

Here is a set of questions which can be used for that purpose ...

1 *Three adjectives to describe the experience?*

This collects information about people’s initial reaction to the experience.

It also serves to capture information about feelings, if relevant. Otherwise this information will be lost when people become more analytical about what happened.

2 *What happened?*

1. Copyright ©Bob Dick 2002. May be copied if not included in material sold at a profit and this notice is included. An earlier version of these questions developed in conversation with Stephanie Chee, Alan Davies, Goh Moh Heng, Richard Kwok, and Shankar Sankaran. I didn’t realise until later that questions for planning operationalise Argyris’s “theory of action”.

Sometimes shortened to “What?”

The purpose of this is for people to “reconstruct” the experience. It is often best done in mixed small groups. Participants will remember different aspects of the activity, and will have reacted differently to it. A more detailed reconstruction allows a better analysis in the following questions.

3 *What have we learned about what happened?*

Sometimes shortened to “So what?”

This invites participants to think about the principles or the like implied by what happened. My own preference is to capture this information in the form of situation, actions and outcomes.

4 *What future use will we make of what we have learned?*

Sometimes shortened to “Now what?”

The purpose is to encourage people to think about the use of what they have learned. It may otherwise remain as learning without application.

Sometimes it is useful to think about this under two headings: What use will we make of it within this activity (or program or whatever)? What use will we make of it elsewhere in our life and work?

Better reflection through better planning

It has been my experience that reflection after the event is helped by careful observation during the event. In turn, that is helped by good planning, and *in particular the surfacing of assumptions*, before the event.

Here is a set of questions for planning before the action, and review afterwards. The purpose is to become aware of the assumptions guiding the actions, and identify if the outcomes support or disconfirm the assumptions.

Before the action

The "a" questions lead to practice. The "b" questions lead to theory:

- 1a What do I think are the *salient features of the situation* that I face?
- 1b Why do I think those are the salient features? What evidence do I have for this belief?
- 2a If I am correct about the situation, what *outcomes* do I believe are desirable?
- 2b Why do I think those outcomes are desirable in that situation?
- 3a If I am correct about the situation and the desirability of the outcomes, what *actions* do I think will give me the outcomes?
- 3b Why do I think those actions will deliver those outcomes in that situation?

After the action

- 0a Did I get the outcomes that I want? Or, more realistically, what were the outcomes that I got, and how well do these accord with those I sought?
- 0b To the extent that I got them, do I still want them? Why, or why not?
- 0c To the extent that I didn't get them, why not?

This final question then returns in more details to the earlier planning questions:

- 1a In what ways was I mistaken about the situation?
- 1b Which of my assumptions about the situation misled me?
- 1c What have I learned? What different conclusions will I reach about similar situations in future?
- 2a In what ways was I mistaken about the desirability of the pursued outcomes?
- 2b Which of my reasons for favouring those outcomes misled me?
- 2c What have I learned? What outcomes will I try to pursue when next I'm in such a situation?

And notice that 3a takes a somewhat different tack:

- 3a Did I succeed in carrying out the planned actions? If not, what prevented or discouraged me? What have I learned about myself, my skills, my attitudes, and so on?
 - 3b If I did carry out the actions, in what ways was I mistaken about the effect they would have? Which of my assumptions about the actions misled me?
 - 3c What have I learned? What actions will I try next time I am pursuing similar outcomes in a similar situation?
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