Collaborative Reflective Thinking

Idea In Short

Individuals can reflect alone, but teams rarely learn by accident. Research on team learning stresses that these processes do not occur naturally, and that groups need deliberate ways to look back at what they did, understand why, and plan changes. Researchers call the habit team reflexivity, and it can happen before, during, and after the work. Collaborative reflective thinking brings that research into everyday practice, so that a team's shared experience becomes shared learning. This article explains what team reflection is, how the three phases work, what conditions support it, how to run a simple session, and what to watch for when reflection turns into blame or ritual.

A project team finishes a tough delivery. Everyone is relieved, and nobody wants another meeting. Three months later, the next project hits the same snag with the same vendor, and the same people say they should have seen it coming. Each member learned something privately, but the team learned nothing it could use.

What collaborative reflection is

Collaborative reflective thinking is the practice of a team reflecting together on its work so that learning belongs to the group. Researchers call the practice team reflexivity.

A Maastricht University paper on team reflexivity after feedback recalls a widely used definition of team learning as an ongoing process of reflection and action, during which teams reflect on their prior activities and plan adjustments for future practice. It adds that, although researchers disagree on details, they generally agree that team learning processes do not occur naturally.1

That second point matters for managers. If teams do not learn by default, then learning must be designed into the work.

Reflection before, during, and after

A training deck from a National Health Service education body, drawing on research by Schmutz and Eppich, describes three phases of team reflexivity. Pre-action reflection takes the form of huddles and briefings. In-action reflection uses recaps, summaries, and invitations for input. Post-action reflection is the debrief. The stated goal across the phases is shared mental models and adaptation, which the deck equates with learning.2

Most teams only use the last phase, and only after big failures. The first two phases are cheap and can prevent problems.

A short briefing at the start of a project can align expectations. A check-in during the work can surface drift while it is easy to correct. A debrief afterward captures what to keep and what to change.

What the evidence says

A systematic review in BMJ Quality and Safety examined team reflexivity in hospital-based interprofessional teams. It included fifteen empirical articles, found that simulation training and video-reflexive ethnography were the most common forms, and described team reflexivity as an approach with potential to support improvements in communication and teamwork.3

The authors noted a limit. Their review could only assess team reflexivity as an activity embedded within specific methods, which means the findings do not isolate reflection from the methods that carried it.

Take that in the right spirit. The evidence is promising and still developing, and health care teams differ from business teams. Use the research to guide experiments, and measure results in your own setting.

Why reflection regulates a team

A chapter in the Oxford Handbook of Group and Organizational Learning describes the relationship of team reflexivity to team and organizational learning, and stresses the dynamic, self-regulatory nature of the process and the role of goal setting.4

Think of reflection as the team's steering. Goals say where to go, results show where you are, and reflection compares the two and adjusts. A team without reflection may drive hard in the wrong direction.

A Springer paper on self-managing teams extends the idea. It argues that such teams must be responsible for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own performance, and that team reflexivity should cover not only retrospective evaluation but also continuous planning, monitoring, and evaluation in action.5

Conditions that help

A review of reflexivity research by Widmer, Schippers, and West reports that safety among group members, a shared vision, diversity, and the leadership style of the team's supervisor influence how much teams reflect. It also observes that, in comparison with reflexive teams, non-reflexive teams show little awareness of team objectives.6

Translate those findings into actions. Build safety by responding to errors with curiosity and not punishment. Make the team's goals visible, so that reflection has something to measure against. Include different perspectives in each review. Ask leaders to take part as learners and not only as judges.

The Maastricht paper adds a point about feedback. For feedback to improve learning and performance, teams must process it, be receptive to it, understand its value, and engage with it actively.

Running a simple session

Keep the format short and repeatable. Allow thirty to sixty minutes, and give the session a fixed place in the project plan.

Start with facts. Ask what we planned, what happened, and what the data show. Let each member add observations without interpretation, as a thinking routine would.

Move to causes. Ask why results differed from the plan, and look for system explanations before individual ones. Test each explanation by asking what evidence supports it.

Then decide. Choose two or three changes, name an owner for each, and set a date to check. Write them down where the next project team can find them.

Close by asking what the team would like to try differently in how it reflects. The reflection practice itself should keep improving.

Reflection for remote and cross-functional teams

Distributed teams lose the hallway conversations that carry informal reflection. Replace them with a short written prompt after each milestone, and collect answers in a shared document before a call.

Cross-functional teams face a different gap. Each function sees one slice of the work, so a joint review is the only place the full picture appears. Invite each function to name one thing that went well and one thing that blocked it, and look for links between the lists.

For both kinds of team, keep a running log of lessons. When a new project starts, read it aloud in the kickoff briefing. The log connects the post-action phase of one project to the pre-action phase of the next.

Linking individual and team reflection

Individual reflection feeds team reflection. Before a session, ask each person to write a few lines on what they noticed and what they would change. Private writing, as in a reflective journal, gives quieter members time to organize their views.

Then use the team session to compare views. Differences in what people saw often explain more than the events themselves, and they reveal blind spots no individual could see alone.

Over time, the team builds shared mental models, a common picture of its work, its risks, and its goals. That shared picture speeds coordination and makes new members productive sooner.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical software team that ships features on time but suffers repeated late-

stage defects. The team lead introduces three light routines. A ten-minute kickoff briefing lists risks and assumptions. A short midpoint check-in asks what has surprised the team. A forty-minute debrief after release asks what happened, why, and what to change.

In the first debrief, members discover that three people held different views of the acceptance criteria, which explains the late defects. The team agrees on a one-page criteria template and a review step before development. Over two quarters, late defects fall, and the team starts to catch mismatches at the kickoff. The team is invented, but the example shows how shared reflection can turn a recurring problem into a fixable one.

Cautions

Avoid blame. If reflection becomes a search for culprits, people will hide mistakes and the sessions will lose value. Focus on processes and assumptions.

Do not let reflection become a ritual. A session that produces no changes teaches people that the exercise is empty. Track action items, and report on them at the next review.

Watch for dominance. Senior members or fast talkers can steer the conversation. Use writing first, rotate facilitation, and ask directly for quieter voices.

Finally, match effort to stakes. A small, routine task does not need a full debrief. Save the longer sessions for work that was costly, risky, or novel.

- 1Dynamics of team reflexivity after feedback, Maastricht University
- 2Team communication in healthcare, NHS Health Education England
- 3Does team reflexivity impact teamwork and communication in interprofessional hospital-based healthcare teams?
- 4Team reflexivity, Oxford Handbook of Group and Organizational Learning
- 5Self-managing teams and social regulation, Springer
- 6Recent developments in reflexivity research: a review

Summary

Collaborative reflective thinking means a team looks back and ahead together, so that shared experience becomes shared learning. Team learning has been described as an ongoing process of reflection and action, and research suggests it does not happen naturally. Teams can reflect before the work in briefings, during it in short check-ins, and after it in debriefs. Psychological safety, a shared vision, and supportive leadership help. Reviews of the evidence in health care suggest promise but note that most studies are tied to specific methods. After your next project milestone, hold a thirty-minute review with three questions: what happened, why, and what will we change.