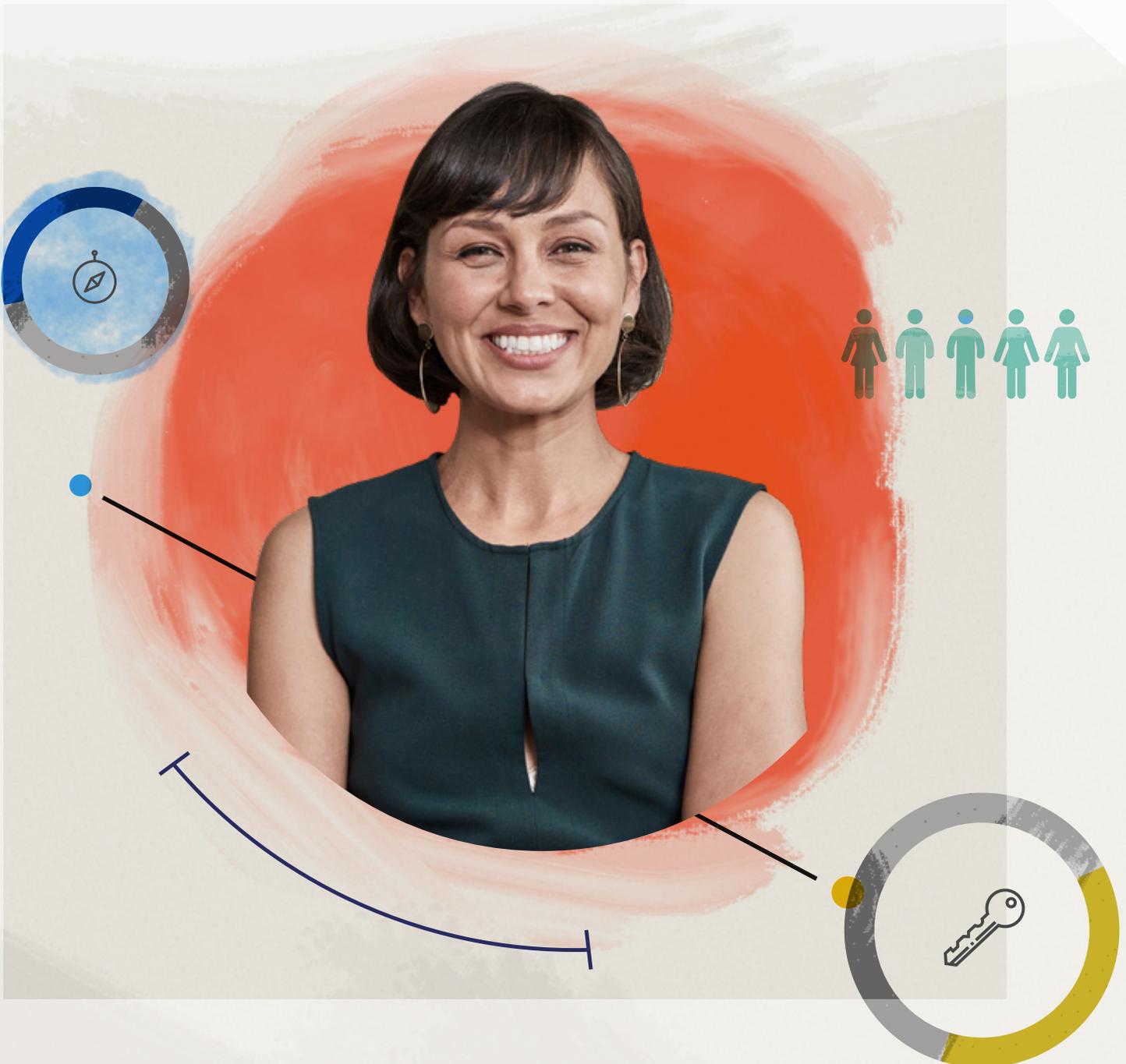




# The Power of Reflection in Workplace Learning



“We do not learn from  
experience ... we learn from  
reflecting on experience.”

- John Dewey





Learning and Development (L&D) programs in organizations today are failing employees. Although American companies spend \$160B on employee training and education each year, studies show that up to 75 percent of information is being forgotten.<sup>1,2</sup> In an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable world, it's critical that HR leaders reexamine their approaches to employee learning and ask themselves: Are we developing a workforce that can adapt and thrive with the pace of change?

In today's workplace, most L&D programs are not producing lasting behavior change. Development is focused more on memorizing facts or learning-by-doing—with little reinforcement to help employees process and integrate new knowledge and skills. As a result, employees quickly forget what they've learned, and regress back to previous behaviors and mindsets.

Programs are missing an integral part of the learning process—the act of reflection. Research shows that reflection is critical to helping us deepen and integrate learning, and effectively apply it to our work and our lives. In fact, reflecting on what has been learned can increase performance by 23 percent.<sup>3</sup>

In this whitepaper, we will explore the essential role that reflection plays in how employees learn new skills, change behaviors, and ultimately improve their work performance and overall well-being. We'll also look at some of the common misconceptions about reflection, and share practices for how to build reflection into both your L&D programs and your employees' daily work experiences.

## What is reflection?

Reflection is defined technically as the “articulation and codification of experience accumulated in the past.”<sup>4</sup> Put more simply, reflection is careful thought about our behaviors and beliefs. It involves assessing our assumptions and reactions to an event, or pondering the meaning and implications of an experience, carefully and persistently. With reflection, we act and move forward in a more meaningful and thoughtful way.

Reflection is an important part of the human experience that differentiates us from other living beings. It is fundamental to our growth and development, especially in developing higher mental functions such as problem solving and decision-making skills.

## Why reflection in the workplace?

In the workplace, employees typically learn and practice new skills through L&D activities such as hands-on trainings or simulations in classroom settings—with no periods of reflection. Without the opportunity to reflect, programs are far less effective at effecting real change, with employees often returning to the status quo.

Here’s why: Once a person has accumulated a certain amount of experience with a task, the benefit of more experience is actually inferior to the benefit derived by devoting time to reflecting upon the experiences they’ve already had.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, there is a point of diminishing returns on experience. We can’t learn more simply by doing more. We must also reflect upon what we’ve done in order to change and grow.

A study among customer service workers demonstrated the impact of reflection on performance. In this study, researchers compared employees’ performance on a task under several conditions: practicing the task alone, self-reflection alone, and self-reflection with sharing (e.g., communicating with others about their progress).





Results showed that workers who practiced self-reflection, and those who reflected and shared their experiences with others, performed significantly better than those who merely practiced. Those who self-reflected were also much more likely to be in the top-rated group for customer satisfaction across all participants.<sup>6</sup>

By practicing reflection, employees can better integrate learnings and approach work with an improved state of awareness and confidence.

## What Makes Reflection a Powerful Learning Tool

To understand the power of reflection on learning, we must understand how the brain processes experience. Inward focus and reflection impact the way our brains make memories, how we make meaning, and how we transfer learning into new contexts.

When looking at long-term learning and development, fMRI studies of the brain have found that the neural networks essential for learning from classroom content are separate from those involved in the reflection and consolidation that should accompany that formalized learning. In this neural “partnership,” one system is responsible for “looking out” (conscious effort) and the other one is focused on “looking in” (introspection, remembering, or reflecting). Each system is equally important.<sup>7</sup>

Both systems can actually enhance the brain’s performance when working in the other’s mode. For example, researchers have found that even momentary time spent “looking in” can improve “conscious effort” tasks like perception, attention, and goal-directed cognition.<sup>8</sup>

Educational psychology has long since recognized the impact of reflection on overall brain function and learning. In schools, reflective practices are a core part of many curriculums, and have been shown

to drive improved student performance. For example, when students question their knowledge, they become actively involved in their own learning and expand their capacity to acquire leadership skills.<sup>9</sup>

Journaling is another activity used to help students reflect on new learnings, record their evolving thought process, and form new conclusions and perspectives. Research has shown that students who write regularly in a journal consistently see improvements in creative thinking.<sup>10</sup> The articulation of connections between new information, ideas, and prior or existing knowledge deepens learning<sup>11</sup> and leads to higher academic performance.<sup>12</sup>

Reflection can also enhance overall well-being. Studies show that brief, positive reflection practices at the end of a work day can lead to decreased stress and improved health.<sup>13</sup>





# Common misconceptions about reflection, and how to address them

Although research has demonstrated the importance of reflection on learning, the concept is often misunderstood, particularly in the workplace. There are many popular misconceptions about the act of reflecting, making it difficult for leaders to understand both what it is and how to utilize it in the workplace.

For learning professionals and leaders to effectively incorporate reflection into L&D programs and on-the-job practices, it's important to understand and challenge these common misconceptions. In the remainder of this paper, we review several of the top myths about reflection, and provide recommendations for how to create more opportunities for reflection in the workplace.

## Myth 1:

### There is not enough time for reflection

In today's world of work, time is often perceived as "the ultimate scarcity"<sup>14</sup> and a valuable resource to guard and protect.<sup>15</sup> In fact, a key challenge for L&D is getting employees to make time for learning.<sup>16</sup>

As the pace of work continues to intensify, reflection may feel like a "nice-to-have" versus an essential part of the learning experience. Yet, as the findings previously discussed illustrate, reflection is a critical driver of both individual productivity and work quality.<sup>17,18</sup> The benefits of incorporating five or ten minutes of reflection each week into work can ultimately help companies save time and expense—and improve their employees' performance.



## Simple, Yet Impactful, Ways to Reflect at Work

Reflection doesn't have to take up much time. Here are some easy ways to build reflection into L&D programs and daily work experiences:

- Integrate brief, high-impact reflection practices into daily work. For example, when transitioning from one activity to the next, pause for a brief moment to reflect on what was accomplished, why it was important, and the impact it had.
- Include reflection in team meetings. For example, at the start of a meeting, ask each team member to reflect on the past week, sharing important moments, successes, and challenges.
- Conduct after-action reviews when projects are completed or an important milestone has been achieved. Engage project teams in discussions about what worked, what could be improved, and what learnings can be applied moving forward.
- Facilitate two- to five-minute reflections at the end of L&D experiences, to help participants integrate the learnings. Consistently doing this will help learners build the habit of reflection in daily work and in their lives.
- Integrate coaching into on-the-job and formal development efforts. With the support of a coach, employees will more effectively extract lessons from experiences and build lasting reflection skills they can use beyond their coaching practice.



**Myth 2:****Work without pause delivers greater results**

In busy, demanding work contexts, the natural inclination for most people is to keep their heads down and work without pause. Employees often assume that every hour they work will result in an hour's worth of productivity, indefinitely, and that this approach will lead them to greater success.

Consider the following statistics:

- Nearly 4 in 10 workers report logging 50+ hours on the job, reflecting a cultural norm of working overtime and rarely stepping away from the desk, even to eat.<sup>19</sup>
- Americans forfeit more than 200 million vacation days that cannot be rolled over, about \$66 billion in lost benefits each year or about \$604 per employee.<sup>20</sup>
- When on vacation, many employees continue to work. If they do take true vacations, they are unable to detach from a productivity mindset. For example, employees may "check off" items on an "experiential checklist" to build their "experiential CV."<sup>21</sup>

And yet, there is a growing body of evidence that shows taking time out of completing tasks for mental processing and reflection—while it may feel counterintuitive—can elevate performance. During periods of focused work, there is a threshold beyond which employees can begin to lose focus and performance on the task declines, known as the "vigilance decrement." By taking brief breaks, employees can maintain and improve the quality of their work.<sup>22</sup>



We know from research that taking breaks that involve processing the meaning of one's work are better for energy management than breaks where one simply switches to another task.<sup>23</sup> Spending time in nature can also boost creativity and innovation. Nature facilitates the pause for reflection, allowing ideas to percolate and gestate for arrival at an "aha" moment.<sup>24</sup> In fact, studies show that spending less than one minute looking at nature improves employee performance upon return.<sup>25</sup>

## Reflection Practices to Boost Performance

Making time for reflection during the workday can reap many benefits for employees and the organization. Here are some ways to build reflection into daily work life in order to achieve greater results:

- Communicate the value of taking time for quality breaks throughout the day to managers and their teams. Encourage them to use this time to mentally disengage from tasks, such as going outside for a change of scenery and reflecting upon what they've learned. This can restore creativity and allow for more innovative thinking.
- Encourage employees to schedule whitespace into their day—which is time that is not booked with core tasks, but is also not empty. This time can be used for processing and comprehension of learning—a core component of executing work. Given how quickly schedules can fill up, suggest that employees block whitespace in their calendars weeks in advance to protect this critical time.
- Weave reflection and mindfulness into your L&D programs. Include activities where participants can learn and practice reflection-based techniques such as meditation, walking in nature, and journaling. This can be especially helpful during full-day trainings, where participants are often indoors and in constant sessions, without time for processing.



### Myth 3:

## Learning is a static process

While most learning experiences in organizations today offer valuable information, they are not heavily informed by evidence-based theory or practice. As a result, they fail to help employees retain information, integrate it into their work, and use it to improve performance.

Research from across the behavioral sciences—from psychology to behavioral economics to organizational behavior—demonstrates that lasting individual transformation entails three essential stages: Learning, Doing, and Being (LDB). These stages describe the process for how employees learn, integrate, and sustain lasting growth and change in their lives.

Most organizations today are focused on the first phase—learning—but employees are not retaining information, and growing. Programs today often approach learning as static—hear it once and you're done. But research shows that without the proper support, 70 percent of the content will be forgotten in about one day.

Learning is an ongoing process and employees need the opportunity to engage with the material in different ways across time to develop and grow—and this includes reflection. Meaningful processing is the cornerstone of deep learning.<sup>26</sup> Employees need the opportunity to reflect on concepts, expand on information, and apply it to different scenarios.

Although reflection is important during each stage of transformation, it is an essential part of the Being phase. During this time, reflective practices help employees solidify the changes they've made. New learnings and behaviors become part of one's identity and feel effortless. For a more in-depth look at this process, read BetterUp's [Learning to Doing to Being eBook](#).



## Reflective Practices that Support Employee Learning

One way that companies are building reflection into employee learning is through coaching. Making reflection part of daily work activities takes conscious effort and practice. Coaches can help employees take a more disciplined approach, working with them to reflect on experiences, process new information, and apply learnings in the workplace. In fact, having a coach can be a critical differentiator between individuals who practice reflection effectively and consistently and those who don't.

Traditionally, coaching in the workplace has been reserved for executives, but technology innovations—such as BetterUp's mobile-based learning platform—have created the opportunity and affordability to bring coaching to organizations at scale.

At BetterUp, our coaching approach helps employees continuously learn through a structured process that drives a learning loop of awareness, growth, and reflection. This continuous learning allows employees to reflect on what they're learning and build confidence in their application of new abilities. In turn, this builds momentum to continue learning and practicing. This type of ongoing and distributed approach results in longer-lasting learning and behavior change, with direct impact on performance.

When coaching is not available, it's important that employees be empowered to engage in independent self-reflection techniques, or have the help of a manager. Here are several ways to make reflection an organization-wide priority:

- Retain and share institutional knowledge around reflection techniques. Provide resources that help illustrate what effective reflection might look like for individuals or teams.
- Support a learning culture that demonstrates clear support from management to engage in reflection practices. This will help empower employees to engage in reflective practices.



- Build “refresh and reflect” moments into employee learning to embed new knowledge and behaviors. For example, when rolling out a new system or initiative, build in opportunities for employees to refresh on the content and reflect on its implications.

## Conclusion

In today’s fast-paced and constantly changing workplace, it is critical that employees be able to develop and grow as business needs evolve. Reflection is an integral part of the learning process and essential to creating meaningful and lasting employee and organizational change.

Looking ahead, we encourage you to take a pause and reflect on these questions:

- What is the value of reflection to you, personally and professionally?
- What impact could reflection have in the growth and development of your employees and leaders—both in the workplace and in their lives?
- What would it look like if you incorporated disciplined reflection more centrally and deliberately in your everyday learning experiences? And, specifically, what steps can you take to integrate 5-10 minutes of reflection into your week?

With some concentrated effort and evidence-based practices, you can ensure that others in your organization benefit from the power of reflection, both in everyday work activities and in L&D programs.

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