Gibbs' Reflective Cycle
Your 10-Minute Guide to Helping Your People Learn From Experience

Reflecting on situations enables people to handle them better.

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Use this simple tool to help your team members learn from their experiences.

Many people find that they learn best from experience. However, if they don’t reflect on their experience, and if they don’t consciously think about how they could do better next time, it’s hard for them to learn anything at all.

This is where Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle is useful. You can use it to enable your people to make sense of situations at work, so that they can understand what they did well and what they could do better in the future.

This guide looks at a simple process that managers can use to help their team members learn from their experiences at work.

Please share it inside your organization.
About the Model

Professor Graham Gibbs published his Reflective Cycle in his 1988 book, “Learning by Doing.” It’s particularly useful for helping people learn from situations that they find themselves in regularly, especially when they don’t go well. Gibbs’ Cycle is shown, below.

Consider asking questions like these to help him describe the situation:

- When and where did this happen?
- Why were you there?
- Who else was there?
- What happened?
- What did you do?
- What did other people do?
- What was the result of this situation?

Step 2: Feelings

Next, encourage him to talk about what he thought and felt during the experience. At this stage, avoid commenting on his emotions.

Use questions like these to guide the discussion:

- What did you feel before this situation happened?
- What did you feel while this situation was taking place?
- What do you think other people felt during this situation?
- What did you feel after this situation?
- What do you think about this situation now?
- What do you think other people feel about this situation now?

Note:

Gibbs’ original model had six stages. The stage we haven’t covered here is “Analysis” – we’ve included it as part of the Evaluation stage.

Using the Model

You can use the model to explore a situation yourself, or you can use it with someone you’re coaching – we look at its coaching application in this 10-Minute Guide, but you can apply the same approach when you’re on your own.

To structure a coaching session using Gibbs’ Cycle, choose a situation to analyze and then work through the steps below.

Step 1: Description

First, ask the person whom you’re coaching to describe the situation in detail. At this stage, you simply want to know what happened – you’ll draw conclusions later.

Tip 1:

It might be difficult for some people to talk honestly about their feelings. Use Empathic Listening at this stage to connect with them emotionally, and to try to see things from their point of view.

Tip 2:

You can use the Perceptual Positions technique to help this person see the situation from other people’s perspectives.

Step 3: Evaluation

Now you need to encourage your coachee to look objectively at which approaches worked, and which ones didn’t.

Ask him:
Step 4: Conclusions

Once you’ve evaluated the situation, you can help your team member draw some conclusions about what happened. Encourage him to think about the situation again, using the information that you’ve collected so far. Then ask questions like these:

- How could this have been a more positive experience for everyone involved?
- If you were faced with the same situation again, what would you do differently?
- What skills do you need to develop, so that you can handle this kind of situation better?

If appropriate, use a technique such as the 5 Whys to help him uncover the root cause of the issue.

In this last stage, you need to come up with a plan so that he can make these changes.

Once you’ve identified the areas he will work on, get him to commit to taking action, and agree a date on which you will both review progress.

Tip:
This tool is structured as a cycle, reflecting an ongoing coaching relationship. Whether you use it that way depends on the situation and on your relationship with the person being coached.

Key Points

Graham Gibbs published his Reflective Cycle in 1988. It has five stages:

1. Description.
2. Feelings.
3. Evaluation.
5. Action.

You can use it to help team members think about how they deal with situations, so that they can understand what they do well, and where they need to improve.