

Why some people grow from setbacks and others don't

*Two people can face similar difficult situations at work, but one may be enlightened by it, while the other just shrugs and moves on. Why? **Todd J. Maurer** writes that experience alone cannot help people develop along their careers. What can make a difference are the insights that they draw from those situations. He identifies two underlying characteristics of people who learn from setbacks: they look for causes within themselves and then work out ways to improve them.*

Experiences shape lives...difficult experiences shape people. We all face challenging circumstances in professional careers from time to time. But how is it that some people take away valuable lessons and new insights that strengthen and improve them while others don't? Two people can go through the same tough experience at work, but one may be enlightened in his/her overall effectiveness as a result, while the other just shrugs and moves on. As managers and executives navigate a disruptive world, beyond knowledge of technology and strategy in uncertain times, they increasingly need to understand how talent can grow from challenges. New insights into the mindsets and thinking skills that allow positive outcomes to flow from difficult circumstances is uniquely valuable – both personally and for developing a workforce.

Experience can be a powerful teacher and is considered to be the largest influence on employee and leader development in the workplace, but research suggests that it is not experiences alone that offer people learning and development. Rather, it is largely the meaning and insights that they draw from those experiences, during and after, that can affect their future behaviour. Reflection on experiences is a common everyday occurrence, but not everyone is good at reflecting in a developmentally constructive way. While it is common in business literature to address differences in things like leadership style, personality, or communication skills, addressing differences in how people reflect on their prior challenging experiences is a relatively unique addition to understanding and shaping professional and leadership development.

Recent research is examining the nature of reflection differences and identifying the type of reflection that leads to productive development and learning after difficult and challenging experiences. While reflection seems important and valuable, there are questions. Which people will do this effectively – if at all?

In [one study](#), people reported wide differences regarding whether they reflected a little or a lot about a challenging event, and how they reflected. For instance, some people seemed to just replay an event in their minds over and over like a movie without digging in to understand, while others analysed it deeply for causes. These kinds of differences suggest that it's not enough to just encourage people to "reflect on what happened" for development, because there are differences in how people approach reflection. Executive coaching engagements and self-help books often encourage some self-reflection but may not offer much guidance on how. Although there is no such thing as a right and a wrong way to reflect, what kind of reflection might produce good results from a professional development perspective?

In our [recently published article](#), we identified two underlying aspects of productive developmental reflection on challenging experiences. First, via a "*Causal Analysis of Changeable Person Characteristics*" (CA) some people tend to look for causes of difficult experiences within themselves, focusing on changeable personal qualities. Second, in attending to *Developmental Action Implications* (DAI) they focus on implications for improvement of those personal qualities (such as behaviour, the skills or knowledge they possessed at the time, goals, or effort). The idea is that, when reflecting on how an experience went for them, some people tend to look for causes of challenge within themselves and the things that they can do something about – and then they tend to focus on the implications for improving those things (CA→DAI).

In two samples of 444 and 419 workers who held leadership responsibilities in jobs from across diverse industries, the reflection tendencies (CA, DAI) were found to be distinct from eight other psychological characteristics (for example, mindfulness). Further, those workers who had more of these reflection tendencies were rated higher by their supervisors on leadership development and were also more successful in promotions and leadership performance. Workers with these kinds of reflections were also more learning-oriented by nature (i.e., they generally were open to learning as an opportunity) and they had more challenging jobs (which provided more fodder for reflection on challenges). In addition, workers higher in these reflection tendencies also were more likely to report being in a company with an error management culture, or an organisation that views errors and mistakes as being productive learning opportunities—which provides a safer context to explore oneself as a source of errors. These findings offer evidence that person, job, and organisational culture characteristics are all relevant to having productive reflections. Further, the research suggests that reflection tendencies help bridge the gap between experiencing challenges, on the one hand, and developing and succeeding, on the other hand. In these reflections, the dual tendency for people to focus on what they “own” or can do something about — and then to focus on improving — seems a key differentiator that is unique and potentially valuable.

It seems that hard knocks or difficult challenges can offer valuable lessons, but only to those who draw out the personal development that is offered by those experiences. We may not be able to control events around us, but controlling how we think about and respond to those experiences is important. Through better understanding differences in how people tend to reflect, we should be better able to structure advice for reflection in developmental contexts to enhance employee and leadership development (for example, in executive education, coaching, or performance improvement).

Further, by examining reflection differences, it might also be possible to identify which employees can benefit the most from challenging assignments or things like high potential leadership development programs, or to help identify where people may need to work on reframing how they think about challenging experiences to draw value from them. The old saying “that which does not kill you makes you stronger” may have some truth, but it is helpful to better understand which people will become stronger and how to elicit productive reflections that lead to strength from difficult life experiences.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on [Toward better understanding developmental reflection differences for use in management development research and practice](#), with Nikolaos Dimotakis, Greg Hardt, and A.J. Corner, in *Journal of Management Development*.
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