

A “Critical” Reflection Framework

Why use critical reflection?

Analysing a critical incident may help you to:

- “reflect-on-action” (ie past experience),
- “reflect-in-action” (ie as an incident happens), and
- “reflect-for-action” (ie actions you may wish to take in future experiences)

Often “reflection” and “critical reflection” are used inter-changeably in the literature. However, critical reflection denotes another level of reflection beyond what you might or might not cover in other forms of reflection (eg. diary, journal). Sometimes action is just “too hot” for us to consciously reflect-in-action (as the incident happens) (eg. Eraut, 1994). This is why a critical reflection framework may be better suited as it requires reflection in relation to past and future action.

A default use of this technique and tool, particularly in “health”, is as a way of reflecting on “what was perceived to go wrong”. While this is a valid purpose, the scope of this framework has broader applications – namely as an appreciative form of inquiry. This framework of reflection starts from a basis of what has worked well and why.

Critical reflection is an extension of “critical thinking”. It asks us to think about our practice and ideas and then it challenges us to step-back and examine our thinking by asking probing questions. It asks us to not only delve into the past and look at the present but importantly it asks us to speculate about the future and act.

What theory underpins this form of reflection?

Critical incident reflection sits well within the action research field or it can “stand-alone” as a learning method. While there is little agreement in the literature about what is reflective practice there does seem to be agreement that critical reflection can be taught to adults.

John Flanagan, who founded the American Institutes for Research in 1946, introduced critical incident reflection. He set out a 20 year plan to improve the effectiveness of organisations and their leaders. His strategy:

- To formulate problems in general terms so that they could apply findings to a broad class of issues;
- To emphasise new research methods to be of central importance;
- To develop “the critical incident technique” to identify contributing factors to the success or failure in specific situations.

Critical incident reflection is used in health, for example, seeking patient views and in multi- and inter-disciplinary team situations.

How can critical incident reflection be used?

Critical incidents can be either positive or negative; an interesting interaction or an ordinary everyday occurrence. Sometimes, depending on the focus and the “rawness” of a critical incident, it may feel uncomfortable to undertake a critical reflection because it highlights our assumptions, views and behaviours.

The critical reflection framework is a guided process to aid analysis and increase the potential for positive outcomes. Analysis of a critical reflection can take place at any point and therefore is useful particularly in development and enquiry orientated programmes (ie. learning and insights can be drawn from, fed back in and across programmes in sync with the rhythm of participant experience and need).

Possible outcomes from undertaking critical reflection include:

- Congratulation and affirmation. Even within a critical incident that someone frames as “unsuccessful” there is usually some part of an adverse situation that has been handled well and this should be acknowledged;
- Immediate action;
- Not resolved;
- No action but the person feels better for talking about it.

Critical incident reflection can be used in different ways to produce narratives (individual and/or group) based on the recall of an experience. For example, critical incident reflection can be of a “one-off” event/experience or of different experiences about the same issue/focus.

Variations in the use of critical incident reflection can be introduced through, for example:

- the combinations of people participating in the critical reflection (eg. different roles or connections to the same experience or issue);
- time (eg. one single incident that occurs on a regular basis; a specified time period, such as six months or at the end of each week).

A critical incident reflection framework

The framework below is a guide for your own reflection and learning from events that have significance to you. The questions under each heading are “prompts” only. The framework is there to support you identify and develop options. There are no right or wrong responses although the overarching frames of “The what?”, “So what?” and “Now what?” are important components in a critical incident reflection.

<p>The what? A description of the incident/experience with just enough detail to support doing your “So what?” section. For example, description about who, what, why, when, where.</p>	
<p>So what? This is the sense-making section that asks you to surface general meaning, significance, your position / view point; actions; emotions (pre-during-post).</p>	<p>Now what? This section makes connections from the experience / incident to further actions. For example, what would you do differently / the same next time? How come? What are key points, lessons learnt to share with your colleagues, network and/or group outside the network? (eg. idea, product, process, concept)? How will you do this?</p>