

PEER REVIEW

A HANDBOOK

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WHAT IS PEER REVIEW?

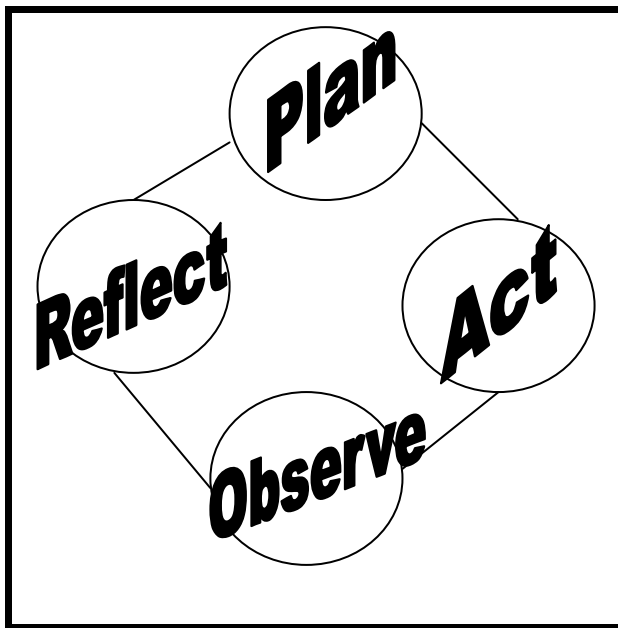
Peer review is a staff development process that is widely used in training and other professional contexts. The basic idea is that the person who is concerned about some aspect of their own work invites a colleague to review the quality of what he or she is doing. In practice we are doing this all the time. It is very common for someone to say - 'Do you have a little time to tell me what you think of this?'; or to ask - 'Has anyone thought of a better way of doing(whatever)?'

When an individual chooses to formalise this process, strategies must be implemented so that maximum benefit is gained. The usual framework is for the two individuals concerned to sit down together and discuss what the reviewee is interested in receiving collegial feedback about. The person who has asked for the review explains what they are doing, and what they would like their 'critical friend' to look for. The critical friend asks any questions that may be required for clarification. The next step is for the critical friend to 'observe' whatever her colleague wants her to review. This may be a 'live' event such as a class or a client interaction, or it may be a recording of such an event, or perhaps a package of some kind. It is very important that the person being reviewed also takes the time to critique or reflect on the event herself.

After the observation, the two get together again, preferably in a comfortable, informal environment, perhaps over coffee. The person being reviewed begins the process by explaining her own observation and reflections, basically engaging in a self-critique. This then provides a basis for her colleague to communicate the perceptions she has noted. The two should discuss their views and finally, the person being reviewed should determine what action she should take to improve her work.

ACTION LEARNING CYCLE

[Zuber Skerritt, Ortrun (1991) Professional Development in Higher Education, CALT, Griffith University, Brisbane.]



As you can see from the above description, the peer review process allows us to enter the Action Learning, or Action Research Cycle which is displayed opposite. This cycle is becoming an increasingly popular staff development tool in all kinds of organisations, including libraries. The reason for its popularity is that it allows staff-development to occur in powerful ways 'on-the-job'.

It also ensures that people who are doing the work continue to adapt to change and share their learning with others without spending lots of time in formal training contexts. This means that what they are learning is automatically becoming part of their working life. Essentially this is a model that encourages people to walk the path of *life-long learning* and transforms the organisations in which they work into *learning organisations*.

So the message is that small beginning made with the peer-review process can lead to significant change in how things happen. The most important point is that the process draws on the natural ways in which people work, formalising them so that maximum benefit is gained.

PEER REVIEW IN GROUPS

Although peer review is usually conducted as a process between two individuals who mutually agree to participate, the process can also occur within groups. It only requires a little modification so that the person(s) being reviewed work(s) with a group of colleagues rather than just one person.

PRINCIPLES OF PEER REVIEW

- The *person being reviewed* must agree to participating in the process. Ideally the person being reviewed should initiate the process, but this is not always what happens in a group context.
- The *process of peer review* should be interesting, supportive and mutually rewarding.
- The *object of review* is a person's observable behaviour or output.
- *What is to be reviewed*, that is the questions to be asked about the observable behaviour, should be determined by the people participating in the review.
- Only *peers* should participate, that is people who are not in a line-management relationship.
- The processes of peer review should be *grounded in* critical thinking and reflection.
- Individual *outcomes of the review* are know only to the peers and should remain confidential. If a group report is produced for management or research purposes individual identities should be protected.
- The *final outcome of the process* should be decisions by the participants about action to be taken to ensure improvements.

PURPOSES OF PEER REVIEW

General Aim: to contribute to the professional development of participants.

General Goals:

- To affirm strengths of individuals (and the team);
- To diagnose weaknesses;
- To provide a supportive environment within which to determine possible improvements;
- To provide a context within which to promote reflective practice.

Specific Purposes:

[The team/individuals may like to determine purposes/objectives for some particular review]

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RULES FOR THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

DOs

- Listen carefully to what is being said by all parties and ask for clarification if necessary.
- Ensure that the people being reviewed have the first and last opportunity to speak during the review session.
- Always begin the process by looking at positive features of the object of review.
- Be careful about how you phrase criticism of the person being reviewed. It is not hard to hurt people's feelings. Use phrases like "I would have done X...", "Why did you do Z....?", "I wonder what would have happened if...?", "Would you consider Y?".
- Feel free to brainstorm - that is throw in ideas and don't criticise ideas!

DON'Ts

- Individuals in a line management relationship should not act as peers.
- Reports to management on the outcomes of the process should not allow individuals to be identifiable.
- Refrain from talking about details of the review process to colleagues who were not involved. [But do talk to them in general terms about the value of the process and the type of outcomes that are possible]

PLANNING FOR PEER REVIEW

To gain as much as you can from any peer review session you need to spend time thinking about what you have been doing in the area under review, and reflect on what you consider to be your strengths and weaknesses. The following is intended as a guide to help you reflect. Use the questions as prompts, modify them if that is appropriate, or invent new ones.

Step One: Spend a little while thinking about how you approached the task being reviewed. Is your approach driven by a particular philosophy? How would you explain it to others? Who or what influenced you in developing this perspective?

Step Two: Try to recall other occasions on which you have done similar tasks to the one being reviewed. What happened? What do you remember about the interaction(s)? What did you do? Why? etc.

Step Three: Now think about the event that is going to be reviewed:

- What are your objectives for the event?
- Do you have any special hopes or fears? Are you trying anything new?
- What do you think will go well?
- What do you expect problem areas to be?
- What would you like your peers to specially notice and comment on about what you do?
- Other.....

ENGAGING IN PEER REVIEW

The following are recommended steps for using during the group meeting. These steps presuppose that individuals have all implemented the first phase: Planning for Peer Review. Plenty of time should be allocated for the discussion.

Step One: Individual(s) being reviewed should introduce themselves and tell the rest of the group about how they approached the task [Step one from the previous page] and their objectives for the event. They should also indicate what they would like their peers to focus on, for the purpose of the review. This last material will come from responses to the question: *What would you like your peers to comment on....?*

Step Two: All members of the group will participate in the event.

Step Three: Those being reviewed should comment briefly on their own performance. They should answer, for themselves, the questions put to the rest of the group. [Make sure they says positive as well as critical things!]

Step Four: An open session in which the 'peers' talk with the person(s) being reviewed, expressing their thoughts and ideas. It is important that they respond also to the specific queries put by the reviewee.

Step Five: The reviewees sum up what they have heard during the session.

REFLECTING ON THE PROCESS

The final part of the peer review process requires you to 'reflect on' or consider what has happened, and determine what you will now do to improve your own practice or that of the team. You may like to use the resources below to help with this process. Write down all the ideas that come to you, so that they are documented and you can refer back to them. **This could lead to a checklist for monitoring personal -and team- practices in future.**

WORDS TO PROMPT REFLECTION		
hunches		emotions
questions	thoughts	
ideas		explorations
conflicts	critical incidents	
comments		disagreements
explanations	insights	

Adapted from Christine Tilley (1996) Education for Library and Information Services Australia

TYPES OF QUESTIONS TO USE FOR REFLECTION

Self-centred questions: How does this affect me?

Factual questions: How many minutes of video did we watch?

Reason questions: Why does he hold those values?

Theory questions: How will what I do now affect clients/other team members?
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Creative questions: What is a different way of looking at this?
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from Peter November (1996) Higher Education Research and Development, 15(1): 115-128
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TOWARDS THE FUTURE

What would I like to do to improve the way I work in this situation?

What could the team do to improve its practice?
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