

What's the Big Deal about "Insights"?

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"Hey, Dennis, when we have a coaching conversation, you start by asking, 'What new insights have you experienced since we last talked?' You encourage me to 'pay attention' between our conversations to prepare me for that question. Why are 'insights' such a big deal with you?"

Any of the following six answers should be sufficient. The aggregate will hopefully convince you.

Increasing your awareness is a powerful way to intentionally improve your effectiveness. My clients work on a personally designed plan for improving skills. However, unanticipated new insights are a huge supplemental source of improvement. The "Aha" experience ushers in positive change.

New awareness comes typically in one of four ways.

- A paradigm shift occurs when new information unexpectedly presents itself, causing you to understand something in a more complete, sense-making way than before.
- Conversation with a colleague who shares a recent insight or some previously known information that is newly relevant to what you are currently addressing.
- Feedback delivers information about your actions that causes you to pause, reflect, and evaluate if you want to behave differently in the future--or continue with your habitual behaviors.
- Just paying attention, in an abnormally intentional way, allows you to observe and give meaning to reactions and behaviors that perhaps you never really knew were occurring.

Insights are how you personalize generic principles. Most training sessions are intended to give you information about what works and what doesn't. You can sit through many training sessions and nod your head knowingly. Intellectual understanding is not the same as experiencing the big "Aha!"

You'll often forget within a week something you learned from a book or a class. However, when you understand a real-life situation in a way that catches you totally by surprise and you describe that new insight to several other people (including me), you don't forget it. It's with you, potentially, for life.

Enhanced effectiveness usually follows an insight. Leaders seek me out to enhance their effectiveness. They think they want greater skill. Mastering a skill, however, requires trial and error followed by repeating (practicing) the healthy behaviors. Experiencing a new insight (through any of the four vehicles described above) typically results in more effective behavior almost immediately.

Reflecting on an insight anchors it, making it truly personal. Sometimes when I make my "Tell me about your insights" request, my client responds, "I know I've had some. I just can't recall them right now." Obviously, no inspired change in behavior has manifested from the insight. Without the rewards coming from improved action steps, the insight has not yet begun to morph into a more effective habit.

Reflecting on an insight usually requires three things:

- pausing when the situation occurs, acknowledging and pondering the new perspective.
- within a day or two, considering other applications of the insight and its meaning.
- describing your new understanding to a third party, mentally rehearsing how you intend to apply it.

Insights that "might have been" often pass unrecognized. I think opportunities for insights occur often (several times a day). New insights are often extremely valuable. A lost opportunity for fresh insight is worthless. Which do you want more of in your life, *extremely valuable* or *worthless*?

Only you can experience your insights. I can give you information, and you might remember it cognitively. However, when you discover new information yourself, and you give it meaning in the context of who you are, what's important to you, and what you want to accomplish, the new awareness will stick with you in a far more passionate and engaging way than any learned guidance I provide.

A new insight is not the same as a recalled memory, something you've studied and memorized. An insight engages a different part of your brain. It's not so much a memory you'll have to retrieve; instead, it's a part of your fabric of "knowing how things work."

What can you do now that you've spent a few minutes reading about "insights"? I suggest two things.

First, increase your commitment to acknowledging, pondering, and sharing your new insights. Instead of searching for new awareness because someone said you should, make discovering insights something you want to do because they help you be more effective in serving others.

Second, start asking your direct reports (and others you influence), "What new insights have you experienced since we last talked?" Part of your job is to build future leaders, and that requires enhancing their effectiveness. Encouraging them to look consciously for greater awareness--and then sharing that new awareness--is a huge contributor to that objective!

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