

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 gained since we last talked?' You encourage me to 'pay attention' in between our conversations so that I'm prepared 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 improve your effectiveness as a leader. My clients work on a personally designed plan for improving their skills. However, unpredictable new insights are a huge supplemental source of improvement.

New awareness comes typically in one of three ways.

--A paradigm shift occurs when new information presents itself in an unexpected way, causing you to understand something in a more complete, sense-making way than before.

--Feedback delivers information about your actions that causes you to pause, reflect, and evaluate if you want to behave differently in the future.

--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 intend 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!"

Often you'll forget something from a book or a class within a week. However, when you experience a real-life interaction in a way that catches you totally by surprise--and you describe that experience to several other people--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 three 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." Clearly, no changed 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. Opportunities for insights occur often (several times a day in my opinion). New insights can be extremely valuable. A lost opportunity for an insight is worthless. Which do you want, 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.

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 personal 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 enhance their effectiveness, and encouraging them to look consciously for greater awareness is a huge contributor to that objective!

Dennis Hooper is an Executive Coach in Atlanta, helping organizations build future leaders, improve processes, and establish healthy cultures. If you want to access his leadership articles, his website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com. You may contact Dennis at dhooper2@juno.com or 404-575-3050.