
The Usefulness of Self-Assessment Tools for Personal Development

Introduction

Personal and professional development is a process that requires one to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses, meditate on their past experiences, question their certainties and be open to new possibilities. The “Personal and Professional Development” module covered a wide range of topics, including self-management, conflict resolution, communication and leadership, and involved various activities which were clearly meant to stimulate our minds and senses. Throughout the module, we have been presented with ambiguous figures, writing exercises, tests and group activities, some of which I found particularly fascinating and instructive. Despite their apparent simplicity, some of them turned out to be very challenging as their completion required a sincere and honest assessment of my character. Reading the activity reflection sheets I had completed at the end of each activity, it was interesting to realise that some of the things I do automatically without even asking myself why, can be explained through specific theories. Stereotyping and assuming that there is only one way to look at certain situations are excellent examples of this. This learning portfolio focuses exclusively on the activities that made me reflect on my own character in such a way to increase my self-awareness, thus contributing to my personal and professional growth. Its main purpose is to briefly describe the activities that I found most meaningful, placing special emphasis on the lessons that I have learnt from each one of them.

Entry 1: Self-Management

Lecture 1 revolved around self-management, a very interesting topic that I was eager to explore as I was hoping to learn how to make better decisions and manage my time more effectively so as to enhance my employability. Contrary to my expectations, I was asked to perform a number of self-awareness activities that were clearly meant to make me appreciate the importance of introspection and self-assessment. Despite my initial scepticism about the effectiveness of such activities, I completed every single exercise and asked myself what lessons I could have possibly learnt from them. One of the perception exercises included a reversible figure that could be perceived as either a young woman or an old woman, depending on one’s personal experiences and age. Since people tend to interact with people their own age, I was quite surprised when I realised that all I could see was an old woman; in fact, it took me a few seconds to realise that the old woman’s nose coincided with the young woman’s profile. That made me wonder what factors were influencing my vision: perhaps my thoughts, beliefs, personal experiences or the way I look at things in general. In an attempt to establish a connection between the exercise I had just completed and the topics discussed in the lecture, I came to the conclusion that anything in life can be seen from various perspectives. All that it takes to start looking at the world in a different way is a sudden change or even a minor shift in one’s mind. As an international student who has been striving to develop strong cross-cultural communication skills, the old woman – young woman figure made me think about the impact of one’s cultural background on how they express themselves and perceive what others say and do. Any effective leader should be aware of the external influences that cause individuals to see different things when facing the same situation; as a result, it is important to be flexible and

keep an open mind when dealing with any disagreements, challenges and conflicts. Lecture 1 encouraged me to improve my communication skills by asking myself how my interlocutors may perceive my words and actions whenever I find myself interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. It also made me appreciate the usefulness of self-assessment tools, which I have been using to identify my main weaknesses. From an analysis of the results that I obtained after completing a number of self-assessment exercises online, I realised that my lack of flexibility and fear of disappointing the ones around me are among the main obstacles hindering my personal and professional development.

Entry 2: Self-Development

Lecture 2 covered a variety of notions and topics such as motivation, rewards, incentives, SMART goals and self-reflection, to name but a few. As a firm supporter of incentives and rewards, I was particularly interested in sharing my views on motivation and finding out whether my classmates agreed with me. We were also asked to perform a self-reflection exercise using Gibb's model of reflection as a tool to analyse the various phases that characterised our first trip to the United Kingdom. While I was already familiar with Gibb's reflective cycle, I have to admit I had never used it to examine my own personal experiences, which is why I saw this activity as an opportunity to do something new and test the model's effectiveness. I began my telling my classmates about the first time I came to the United Kingdom, starting from the moment I walked out of the airport. I described my first cab ride, painted a rather detailed picture of my hotel room and the things I saw during my stay. I then moved on to the emotional phase and realised that anxiety and stupor were among the most intense feelings that I could remember. When the airplane landed, I was both anxious and curious as I was not sure what to expect and while walking around London, I was amazed and overwhelmed by the greenery, the many languages people spoke, the architecture and the overall atmosphere. My overall evaluation of the experience was certainly positive, to the extent that it encouraged me to improve my English and apply for a course at a UK university. It was before my departure that I gave myself a year to become fluent enough to be able to study in the United Kingdom. My classmates' reaction to my story made me realise that they knew exactly what I was talking about as they had probably experienced similar emotions in occasion of their visit to the United Kingdom. I found this exercise both instructive and beneficial as it made me aware of the fact that as informative and useful as books may be, my past experiences represent a valuable source of information that I have never really exploited. Being introspection a highly effective way to examine one's emotional processes and mental states, I believe that I should spend more time meditating on my past experiences in order to grow both as a human being and a professional.

Entry 3: Communication and Relationships

Lecture 3 revolved around communication, conflict management and workplace relationships. Conflicts and disagreements are bound to arise sooner or later when working with others; I personally have been involved in a minor conflict situation once, which I resolved by accommodating a colleague's concerns even though I was firmly convinced that he was wrong. I found the "Managing Conflict" exercise particularly useful as it allowed me to imagine what it would have been like if I had adopted a different conflict management approach that time. The exercise listed five possible conflict management approaches, namely forcing, accommodating, avoiding, compromising and collaborating. When I asked myself how I would respond to a co-worker who will not compromise as she believes that her ideas are always best, I suddenly

pictured myself avoiding any form of direct confrontation, probably because of my peaceful nature. However, there are situations where withdrawing from a conflict would do more harm than good, so I forced myself to consider alternative approaches as well. After envisioning various scenarios, I reached the conclusion that the best way to reason with a person who thinks she is always right would be to collaborate with her by discussing my concerns with her and encouraging her to find a solution that would suit both of us; alternatively, I believe a more forceful approach would be appropriate, even though it is likely that my opponent would react in a hostile way. At the end of the exercise, I certainly appreciated how challenging it can be for a leader to coordinate different people whose different ideas, views, characters and backgrounds may easily result in unproductive, long-lasting conflicts. I believe that is why traits such as charisma, self-confidence and emotional maturity are commonly associated with effective leadership, as a charismatic, confident and mature leader would find it relatively easy to draw others to themselves, express their views, manage others and resolve conflicts without letting their feelings interfere with their ability to make wise decisions. While I am aware that my reluctance to confront others stems from a lack of self-confidence, I am certain that certain skills can be acquired and developed over the years, which is why I intend to challenge myself and push my limits so as to become a more effective leader and mediator. Specifically, my goal is to learn when and how each conflict management approach should be implemented, without letting my insecurity prevent me from doing the right thing.

Entry 4: Leadership

Leadership is a topic that has always fascinated me. Over the centuries, history has been shaped by numerous leaders who are all associated with certain characteristics, regardless of the impact that their actions and decisions have had on mankind. Julius Caesar and Adolf Hitler, for example, have been two great leaders who have resorted to different methods and techniques to achieve similar goals, i.e. empowering their respective peoples, conquering new lands and pursuing glory, to name but a few. A question that I always ask myself whenever I think of a successful leader is whether they were born with certain innate qualities or their success is / was the product of intensive training, experience and practice. One of the first exercises we were asked to complete required us to write down five personality traits and / or qualities that we associate with good leadership. It didn't take me long to identify the traits that, in my opinion, all good leaders possess: charisma, self-confidence, intelligence, determination and creativity. When I then reflected on the traits I had just written down, I realised that there were many more qualities that I wish I could add to the list, such as moral integrity, agreeableness, openness, responsibility and an innate tendency to innovate. Nevertheless, I chose not to edit my initial list and compared it with the one completed by my neighbour. Surprisingly, my neighbour's list was quite similar to mine, although it included some of the qualities I had thought of without actually adding them to my list. At that point, I remember wondering why people tend to associate leaders with certain traits, when I am sure there are many good leaders out there who are not particularly confident, charismatic or intelligent. After all, a non-intelligent people may find it easier to make bold decisions, achieve success and lead others by relying on their instincts rather than overthinking everything. What I found interesting about Lecture 4 was the fact that it showed exactly how experts' approach to leadership evolved between the 1930s and the 2000s, with early researchers focussing primarily on the innate traits that make a leader and later researchers exploring external factors and circumstances.

Entry 5: Engagement and Professionalism

Lecture 5 explored the ethical and diversity-related challenges that one is likely to encounter when engaging with others in the workplace. As a person with strong moral values, I found Exercise three fascinating as it made me question some of my principles. To be precise, while I know that borrowing money from an organisation's petty cash without permission is unethical, I wondered whether I would report a colleague to management if I ever caught them borrowing money. The answer would probably be no as long as the money is returned within a reasonable period of time. However, reflecting on the questions "Is borrowing the money fair?" and "Whom could it harm and why?", I realised that borrowing money is only fair when one agrees to lend their assets to another party. How would I feel if someone borrowed my smartphone without asking me first? I would certainly get upset as I would expect anyone who wishes to borrow my smartphone to first ask me whether I can lend it to them for some time. As innocuous as taking money out of an organisation's petty cash box may seem, it is possible that the organisation may need that money to pay for something important before the borrower returns it. It follows that the scenario depicted in the exercise is a clear example of unethical behaviour. Being people's ethical principles the product of both internal and external factors, it is important to keep in mind that what is ethical to one person may be perceived as being unethical by someone else. For example, in western organisations, exploiting one's connections in order to obtain favourable treatment is commonly considered as a grave form of corruption, whereas in many eastern countries, forming strategic friendships to achieve one's goals is perfectly acceptable. It follows that there exists a strong correlation between culture and ethics, which is probably why Lecture 5 covered not only ethics but also various forms of diversity, including cultural and ethnic diversity. Similarly to individuals, business entities also have certain ethical values that usually reflect the environment in which they operate; as a result, before accepting to work for a company, one should first investigate the company's code of ethics and conduct so as to ensure that it is compatible with their own personal values. Lecture 5 helped me see both ethics and diversity through the eyes of a potential employer: as an employee, I would base my decisions on my own values and see any cultural differences as a possible source of conflict; however, organisations tend to see diversity as an asset and expect their employees to act in accordance with their own ethical principles.

Conclusion

Before embarking on this module, I did not believe in the efficacy or usefulness of self-assessment tools, to the extent that I saw them as a waste of time. Having to complete several self-assessment activities has made me realise that as simple as they may be, some exercises are actually quite challenging as they force participants to evaluate themselves from alternative perspectives. I was surprised to find out that despite my apparent rigidity, I am actually flexible enough to question some of my most deeply-rooted ideas and beliefs. This module has helped me identify a number of weaknesses that I know I will have to work on in order to grow both personally and professionally. These include my conflict management skills and my tendency to base my actions and decisions on a fixed set of ideas and habits, thus failing to consider alternative paths. I have also learnt to appreciate the value of my past experiences, which I believe I should analyse in greater depth and share with others in order to achieve greater self-awareness. In view of the lessons learnt from Lecture 5, I also intend to familiarise myself with various organisations' codes of conduct in order to gain a better understanding of what employers expect from their employees, in terms of ethical behaviour.