Recap of GEO Session on Your Leadership/Your Reflective Practice

By Jan Jaffe with feedback from fellow presenter, Janis Reischmann

I had a hunch: If everyone in a room reflects on their practice, especially the practices they turn to when stymied somewhere between intent and outcome, something good and potentially powerful would result.

By “practice” I mean the tools and skills one uses to have difficult conversations, move ideas along, work across the boundaries of different systems, bring one’s best assets and managing one’s worse behaviors in service of a task.

If my hunch was right, we all have good and bad ways of reflecting on ourselves but largely they are invisible to others – sometimes even to ourselves. Could we create a space for sharing practices to up everyone’s game?

While I have been intent on discovering philanthropy’s reflective practices with a team of colleagues The Giving Practice, Exponent Philanthropy had been involved in another kind of exploration around 7 traits of leadership based on the actual experiences of 23 women (ahem) who are presidents or executive directors of foundations participating in a year-long peer exchange program to hone skills called Master Juggler Executive Institute.

When Hanh Le, then Chief Program Officer at Exponent Philanthropy heard that The Giving Practice was exploring the role of reflective practice as a discipline within philanthropy, she called to see what we might do together.

Could we ask philanthropy practitioners to help us discover reflective practice skills tied to different leadership traits? GEO was game for a conference session to test the theory, and a mash up of these two inquires took off.

Janis Reischmann, ED of Hau’oli Mau Loa Foundation, a participant in the Master Juggler Executive Institute that produced the article on leadership traits, and one of Exponent’s board members agreed to help me run the session.

Cut to the chase: 50 people at GEO agreed to test drive a dilemma of their own against 4 simple reflective practice tools. We explored “what’s under the water line” of complicated events that can’t be seen but must be attended to, use of “critical incident journaling” rather than talking about something that went wrong, choosing “images that evoke” to explain a situation before using words to describe it and working with an “active listener” (versus a hallway consultant) to hear out the situation.

Next, each of us ranked our leadership traits and shared reflective practice tools in our most well-worn trait. We looked for practice tools that might help us in the trait that we most want to develop and we explored what traits were most commonly strong among us. We all noticed that no one had identified the leadership trait of ‘change manager’ and wondered if that might be an area for future learning. We also parsed reflective practice into what we might do beforehand to prepare ourselves, what we do in the moment when things go awry and what we do afterwards to assess how things went.

Many people made time for reflection “when there’s no time”

* Build in practice of quiet “deep work” time (e.g. 2 hours/day)
* Drive home without the radio to review the day
* Go for a run
* Intentionally make space before or after a meeting for unplanned conversation

There were examples of creative journaling:

* I keep a “wonder log” of questions and curiosities: “I wonder if…
* Before-action: I prep by clarifying my intentions to myself and reminding others
* After-action: pay attention to how/when things are progressing in ways that are different than I imagined and invite input to understand and course-correct

Techniques were offered for reflective practice tied to challenging situations:

* In difficult conversations – openly recognize the situation is difficult, pause to give it space, name the difficulty, invite participants to reflect on difficulty – feelings, ideas and solutions and collectively discuss the group reflections
* GRACE: Gather my attention, Reflection on my intention, Attune to myself and others, Consider what truly will be of service, Engage and then End
* Notice when I’m triggered or sure I’m right and then pause and let others fully express themselves while I listen.

Janis and I thought you might be interested in trying these explorations inside your foundation. The handouts from our session are attached. If you’d like either of us to hear your ideas for a session or to hear what you did, be in touch:

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Would you like to learn more about Philanthropy’s Reflective Practice?

We have a web site coming out soon. Contact Jan for an alert about its release.

Here is another invitation to explore: Exponent Philanthropy will offer a new Coaching for Effective Philanthropy program in 2016 and the Master Juggler Executive Institute in 2017. Check out their Web site for details.