

Learning from the Past

Overview

Understanding the operating environment in which you work, manage, or lead is a critical component of being effective in the workplace. Likewise, being able to learn from that environment and forecast its trends as well as being agile and responsive to its predictable and unpredictable changes is equally as important. This Stream will teach you how to contextualise the operational environment in which you work and give you the ability to understand what some of the trends and drivers might be that may shape its future direction.

At the same time, you will learn how to reflect upon that same organisational environment to identify the lessons and insights for both yourself and the organisation that can be used to step into the future with more competence and confidence. In addition, and understanding that the past is not an accurate predictor of the future, you will also learn how to develop personal and organisational agility to more competently and confidently manage unforeseen challenges and unintended consequences that will inevitably emerge as the future unfolds.

In this module, you will:

- Identify the organisational context in which you operate in through the application of a macro-environmental analysis framework.
- Evaluate the importance of self by drawing conclusions between organisational and individual learnings based on information gained from a macro-environmental analysis.
- Communicate the importance of what it means to be agile in a business context and the role it plays in helping to navigate the future.

Why is learning important

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle is often quoted as saying “the unexamined life is not worth living”, implying that all experiences have value in them in the context of developing a wisdom about our life.

He was also one of the earliest thinkers to explore and express the notion of *arête* (excellence) as a theory of virtue and its relationship to *eudemonia* or “human flourishing” as the means for achieving a person’s full potential. Virtue came to signify moral and intellectual excellence as the highest good that individuals could attain, and through their virtues, they contributed to the creation of a good society.

Achieving *arête* or excellence was obtained through *phronesis*; the intellectual virtue translated as ‘practical wisdom’, ‘prudence’ or simply ‘good sense’. *Phronesis* allowed an individual to determine the ‘golden mean’ when faced with difficult or complex dilemmas, such as the tension between compassion and justice, which was developed over time and with experience. All experiences in life, fortunate or unfortunate, gave rise to the opportunity to practice and express virtue. The more a virtue was practiced with wisdom, the better a person’s life became.

Likewise, the Buddha placed great emphasis on lived experience as the ultimate teacher of what it meant to be happy and what it meant to suffer. By maintaining Mindfulness applied to our lived experience, we could distinguish between objects of virtue that led to happiness and objects of non-virtue that led to suffering.

From a Buddhist perspective, the ethic that leads to genuine happiness is compassion. The more we come to understand compassion, the more ethical we become as people, and the more ethical we become as people, the happier we become. This form of happiness is not to be found in a fleeting pause of the pervasive sufferings within our lives, but a genuine happiness that displaces suffering altogether and does not return. Compassion by its very definition includes being able to see, sense, and clearly feel the suffering of another sentient being and taking whatever wise action is available to us to prevent or alleviate that suffering.

In other words, our lived experience and its learnings help us to understand genuinely and wisely what either helps or harms others. However, attempting to learn simply as an intellectual exercise without the lived experience was of little if any benefit in developing wisdom about one's life.

The point of raising the insights from two ancient and wise philosophers from both Western and Eastern traditions of thought is to show how important it is to gain knowledge and learn from our lived experiences as a means of becoming better, happier human beings for the benefit of ourselves and others that we are in relationship in some form professionally, personally, or otherwise. If we are operating or participating in an institution such as a government department, then we are inevitably going to have an impact on the lives of other people.

Being mindful of this can only help us 'make the world a better place' which is ultimately why our public institutions exist. In a similar way, it is also important for our organisations to learn the lessons of the past to create a better future. Both personal and organisational learning is an interdependent and iterative process. Why is this so? Because institutions are made up of people. Our individual and collective experiences and subsequent learning contributes significantly to how we view the world and how we contribute towards creating our futures.

Undertaking a contextual analysis of your operating environment

Contextualising your environment

Contextualising our environment is critical if we wish to maintain our relevance as well as being able to anticipate our futures to the fullest extent possible understanding that paradoxically the future is uncertain and not altogether shaped by the past. Contextualization allows us to "close the gap of surprise" and gives us a level of confidence that we understand and appreciate the landscape upon which we operate as a Department. Of course, this context changes depending upon a range of factors that includes the level in which we operate, the amount of access we have to various aspects of the operating environment, and the time in which the analysis is undertaken. Contextualisation is not a static process. It always needs to be recast at some point in a strategic life cycle of an organisation, and more often when there is a significant rupture, pivot, or shift, that upsets what is known or thought to have been true. A change in Government is a simple example of this.

Understanding your current context to predict future trends

Contextualization also sets up the foundations for strategizing. This process often uses what is called a SCOR analysis: Strengths, Constraints, Opportunities, and Risks. This process is beyond this learning module however it is important to understand that an organisation cannot undertake an effective SCOR analysis without first understanding the context of the operating environment that they wish to strategize. It is also important to understand that the elements of SCOR need to be in the back of our minds when we contextualise our environments. In other words, one of the principal reasons for contextualising our environments is to set the scene so that we can then seek out opportunities into the future as well as look out for any risks along the way. We are also trying to utilize our strengths as we move forward whilst being aware of our constraints and looking for opportunities to improve upon them. By understanding that this is our intention to contextualise helps us to focus in on the relevant aspects of our operating environments.

The process we use to contextualise the operating environment is known as PESTLE. It is a simple yet effective process that covers the following elements (with some examples):

<i>Political</i>	The influences and trends of both big “P” and small “p” politics both nationally and internationally (if applicable), power relationship influences (other Departments, Governments etc.)
<i>Economic</i>	The departmental budget status and trends, available funding and trends into the future, state of the economy nationally and globally, employment availability
<i>Social</i>	Demographics, age distribution, social policy settings, trends in societal attitudes, shifting values, popular sentiments.
<i>Technological</i>	Trends in research and development, current and future technological drivers
<i>Legal</i>	Governing legislation, regulation, policy, process, procedure
<i>Environmental</i>	Climate change awareness and effects, sustainability, environmental standards

When considering each one of these elements, it is important to keep in mind what “pivot variables” might arise. In other words, what might a major shift, disruption, or change look like within each or any of the elements and what effect might that have? These variables can have major ramifications on organisations, especially if they have not been properly considered when there was an opportunity to do so.

It is also important to use both the “rational mind” and the “intuitive mind”. The use of both the rational mind and the intuitive mind is an iterative process. We need to check backwards and forwards to make sure our analysis is as insightful AND accurate as possible. The use of data, trends, reports, and evidence is critical to PESTLE. However, so are the intuitions that we have developed over the course of our personal life and professional career. The “lived

experiences” of our life also contain valuable insights about the present and future context of the world ‘as we understand it’ and these can also be useful.

In so doing, this is not about egotistical self-opinion, but rather a deeper contemplative reflection upon what we have seen, sensed, and felt (i.e., experienced) throughout our life that could add value to this analysis. Whilst it is impossible for our view of the world to fully align with the views of others, it is still important that we bring forward our perspectives as a contribution to a larger body of thought and knowledge.

Finally, it is always good to remember that part of our obligation towards each other as human beings is to make the world a better place. Reflecting on the wisdom of both Aristotle and the Buddha, our lived experience shows us what good can look like and it is important that we maximise the collective insights from those experiences to help contextualise the environment in which we operate as well as the world we wish to collectively create towards the greater good.

Techniques for Self and Organisational Reflection and Learning

Capturing learning

The operating environments that we seek to contextualise are the same environments that provide us with a rich array of insights, lessons, and learning (i.e., experiences), both personally and organisationally. As humans, we are active participants in a world of infinite cause and effect. The actions that arise from what we think, say, and do, individually and collectively, help to create our worlds. Most importantly, what we think always precedes what we say or do, whether those thoughts are conscious or unconscious.

Our mental processes of thought are further shaped by where we focus our attention as well as our intentions/motivations, feelings, and discriminations/perceptions. These processes are continuous and interdependent. They in effect, “create our world” as we cognize it, recognize it, and understand it.

Finally, underpinning all these mental processes is the presence of ignorance. That is, we cannot possibly “know” all that is needed to understand infinite causes and effects as well as the role we play in them. Instead, much of what we think, say, and do is in ignorance of our contribution towards both unintended causes and effects for ourselves and for others.

With this as a basis of understanding, we can enter a world of reflection by accepting that, except in the most extreme of circumstances where we make no contribution to cause, we are to greater or lesser degrees “the Architects of our life” and the “Authors of our story”.

This perspective liberates us by granting us with the power of choice. That is, because we contribute to causes, we can develop a wisdom about wiser choices that contribute towards better outcomes and effects, both for ourselves, and for others. However, to do this, we must also accept responsibility and accountability for those choices. Often, this is what makes self and organisational reflection so difficult. Done well, we come to realise that we contributed, in greater or lesser degrees, to either fortunate, neutral, or unfortunate circumstances and

outcomes. And whilst it is easy to accept responsibility and accountability for the fortunate ones, it is much harder to accept the neutral and unfortunate ones.

The lenses for reflection and learning

To ease this burden, there are some personal and organisational techniques that can be deployed to better understand these causes and effects as well as alternative choices. These techniques emerge from some of the Virtues advocated mostly by the Buddha but also in part by Aristotle. They are:

- Non-harmfulness (Compassion)
- Non-judgment (Acceptance)
- Non-anger (Patience)
- Forgiveness
- Mindfulness
- Wisdom

To help us with our understanding, it may be helpful for us to see these Virtues metaphorically as lenses in which we view the world, focus our attention, and help shape our intentions/motivations, feelings, and discriminations/perceptions. Remember we are trying to dispel our ignorance and gain a greater appreciation as to what are the causes of our own and others fortunate, neutral, and unfortunate circumstances and outcomes. Each of these lenses helps to clear a path to greater reflection, learning, and understanding.

We should also note that each of these Virtues worked interdependently with each other Virtue. However, for ease of understanding, we will describe each one separately noting that we may refer to the others at the same time.

Non-harmfulness (Compassion) essentially means that we are committed to an ethic of no harm to Self or Other through anything that we say, think, or do. Harm does not only manifest in physical form, but it can also arise from harmful thoughts in the mind as well as harmful speech. For most people, physical harm is relatively easy to understand (e.g., killing, wounding, sexual misconduct). Conversely, harmful thoughts and speech are sometimes more difficult. For example, harmful speech includes lying, divisiveness, harsh words, and idle gossip. Harmful thoughts include anger, vindictiveness, jealousy, covetousness, and harmful intentions. When any of these are present and we act on them, we are setting up the causes of suffering for ourselves and others.

Therefore, instead we need to be compassionate with ourselves. We do this by recognizing our suffering and then granting ourselves patience, kindness, and acceptance without judgment. We allow ourselves to appreciate that it is our ignorance and fallibility that causes much of this suffering, and then we begin the gentle but firm process of committing to wiser actions of mind, speech, and body to alleviate our distress.

Non-judgment (Acceptance) essentially means suspending our automatic harsh judgments in favour of deep listening to better understand the causes of suffering. Non-judgement does not mean no judgment, nor does it suggest amorality or immorality. Instead, it allows us to better

answer the “why” question before we cast a judgment. Ironically, the better we develop our skills in non-judgment the better our judgments are when we use them. Judgment is an important part of determining right/wrong, fairness/unfairness, and justice/injustice. When we get better at answering the “*why*” question we increase our capacity to learn how to do things better next time. We increase our wisdom.

Acceptance does not mean we do not do something about harmfulness, but it does mean we allow ourselves to see the “*whole world*”, not just our discriminatory perception of it. Acceptance that the good, neutral, bad, and ugly are all happening is not to acquiesce to the arising harm and suffering. Instead, it opens us up to wiser choices about how we address the harmfulness. Resistance or denial can often blind us to the depth of the problem we are seeking to address because what is truly happening does not accord with our view of how the world “*should*” be.

Non-anger (Patience) essentially means that we become very mindful of the perpetual presence of anger in our minds, and we take positive steps to alleviate it by exercising patience. The potential for anger is always present in our minds and it is the root cause of all violence, both physical and mental. No one escapes this reality albeit the extent in which it manifests varies considerably. If our Mind is full of anger and rage, then we must exercise extreme caution before speaking or acting. In these circumstances, complete silence is often the best course of action.

Forgiveness essentially means we initiate an act of transformation in which we release ourselves from the negativity and toxicity that otherwise arises from holding onto the thought, through a mind of anger, that we have been unjustifiably aggrieved and that only righteousness and vengeance will suffice in seeking what our ego would interpret as entitled justice and fairness.

The reality is we all make mess. We all aggrieve other people, sometimes consciously, often unconsciously, and other people aggrieve us. No one can ever hold the mantle of perfection and claim not to have offended anyone. To even contemplate such a thought would be both arrogant and ignorant. Instead, forgiveness requires both humility and compassion. The ability to accept wholeheartedly that we are responsible for aggrieving others, and the compassion to understand that most people aggrieve us because of their own internal suffering; suffering that we too can relate, as it is our own internal suffering that drives us to aggrieve others.

We owe it to ourselves, and each other, to reflect upon our own perceived limitations and over time, forgive ourselves for those things that we did or did not think, did or did not say, or did or did not do. Having reached some sense of inner peace about our own perceived limitations, we owe it to others to grant their forgiveness for they have endured the same internal suffering.

Mindfulness essentially means that we have the mental clarity to understand not only what thoughts, feelings, and emotions are arising in our minds whilst being fully present in moment without judgment, but also that we are aware of the unhelpful and harmful ones and know where to place our concentration to alleviate them. For example, we know that anger is harmful so when we see it in our minds, we choose to replace it with patience. Likewise, if we witness

an internal dialogue of harsh speech, we replace it with kinder words. In short, when we are mindful, we see in our Minds the “*whole world of good, neutral, bad, and ugly*” without judgment and then choose modes of thought, word, and action that alleviate distress and move towards happiness and flourishing.

Wisdom essentially means that we progressively increase our understanding of how much of our own thoughts, words, and actions contribute to the causes of our fortunate, neutral, and unfortunate circumstances and outcomes. We do this by reflecting upon our lived experiences as well as understanding what it is we need to practice, maintain, change, or achieve to dispel as much of our ignorance as possible and maximise opportunities for increasing fortunate circumstances and outcomes into the future.

Applying the Six Lenses of Reflection and Learning personally and organisationally

To briefly recap, it is our lived experiences that provide us with all the opportunities we need to become happier, healthier, and wiser people over time. It is through our individual and collective lived experiences that we learn what it genuinely means to be profoundly loving, compassionate human beings. Many of our philosophies, mythologies, and theologies as well as our art, music, poetry, theatre, and literature have all pointed us towards this truth: that the greatest meaning and purpose of humanity is to profoundly love and be loved. Sound too much for a short course on “learning from the past”? Trust me it is not! Ultimately, everything we think, say, or do is trying to move us away from our suffering and towards our happiness which is ultimately to profoundly love and be loved.

Personal reflection and learning

So, with this in mind, the best way to personally reflect is to take the time to sit comfortably and quietly in a space that you consider safe and sacred. Start by focusing gently on your breath and simply observe, without judgment, what arises in your body and mind. If it helps, picture your Mind as a clear blue sky and simply watch the clouds of thoughts, feelings, and emotions float in and out without effort. Every time your mind wanders just gently bring it back to this image whilst focusing on your breath as it moves in and out of your body. Slowly, you will start to feel “better”: more relaxed, less anxious, calmer, and more open. This may not happen straight away, but gently, slowly, and progressively it will. Try doing this simple exercise for about 5 minutes or longer if you wish. There is no set time limit. The point of the exercise is to find a sense of peace and tranquility in your Mind.

Then, when you are ready, reflect on one or more of the Lenses and gently try and understand what it is asking of you. Take the one you are most comfortable with and then bring forward any life experience that you find reasonably comfortable about and view it in the context of this Lens. When you are ready, simply ask yourself (using non-judgment for example), in what way might I have contributed to the causes of my success or otherwise? What did that experience teach me? To what extent is the lesson useful to me in moving me towards a greater sense of happiness and well-being? To what extent is it moving me in the opposite direction? What is the lesson I need to take on board to help move me in a more positive direction? An important point to note is that our lessons are deeply engrained in us because our habits of mind

are deeply ingrained with them. In other words, the lesson will probably pop up more than once! This is a good thing! It is reinforcing a greater sense of wisdom.

Organisational reflection and learning

The facilitation of organisational learning and reflection is more complex but follows the same principles. It is the responsibility of the leader to create a genuine “safe place” for people to feel comfortable to reflect upon their lived experiences, and to that end all of the Lenses are applicable here. It is the responsibility of each member of the group to contribute towards this “safe space” and to honor that commitment.

The first time this is practiced, more than likely it will be necessary to explore the different Lenses and to begin developing an understanding of what they mean and how they might be applied. This will be necessarily imperfect however as long as everyone commits to getting better then trust will grow and insights will flow.

Also, the extent to which people share their reflection is a matter for them. No one should ever feel pressured to verbalize their reflections if they do not feel comfortable.

If there is any discomfort or uneasiness, then it is usually best to limit the reflections of lived experience to the organisational context. This is not to say that a person cannot contribute personal insight, but it may feel more appropriate if both the lived experience and insight is directed towards the broader organisational context. Ultimately, this will depend upon the dynamics of each group.

The importance of capabilities/competencies in preparing for the future.

The insights and learning that emerge from your own personal reflections are a gift to yourself and the extent to which you share them with others is entirely a matter for you. Your sense of Wisdom will help you to decide who, when, and where you share them with others. But in any event, the organisational operating environment and your subsequent reflections have helped you learn these things which is of great benefit to yourself, and the extent to which you are willing to share will contribute positively to informing the organisational context that you will explore further in the PESTLE analysis.

The insights and learning that emerge from a broader reflection of two or more people form a critical aspect of helping the organisation in two principal ways. Firstly, it significantly contributes towards contextualising the operating environment within the framework of PESTLE. Secondly, it also significantly informs the subsequent analysis of SCOR.

By undertaking an analysis of both personal and organisational lived experiences using the six Lenses as a guide to how we view the world affords us personally and the organisation more broadly a profoundly deep reflexive understanding of what it is that needs to be practiced, maintained, changed, or achieved.

Understanding Agility

What is agility?

Agility is the ability to think, speak, and act quickly with wisdom. Reflecting upon our earlier observations about contextualising the operating environment, not all things can be forecast, trended, or predicted. Some things, and sometimes those things are big things, can turn up unannounced. When they do, we need to move quickly and decisively. Often this is described as pivoting or shifting.

Given that the causes of emerging circumstances and experiences are immeasurable, it should be of no surprise that things can change quickly. However, unfortunately many people and organisations are not well placed nor competent in making these changes. Their agility is often deficient and sometimes almost absent altogether.

There are many reasons for this however it is important to note that the Six Lenses of Reflection and Learning clear the path for agility.

To demonstrate, let us briefly look at the antithesis of the six lenses. They would be:

- Harmfulness (negative thoughts, words, and actions)
- Excessive and subjective judgments
- Anger
- Blame
- Mindlessness
- Ignorance

All of these negative attributes would be aimed at both Self and Other and would result in suspicion, low trust, deep division, protectionism, low morale, and poor commitment to name but a few of the detrimental effects. None of these effects complement our definition of agility.

Unpacking the characteristics of agility

The literature on personal and organisational agility is both rich and diverse. However, for our purposes, we can conclude that there are six characteristics that contribute towards personal and organisational agility that are informed by the six lenses of reflection and learning. These characteristics equally apply to individuals and organisations. They are:

- *Balance* – The ability to weigh up options with mindfulness, non-judgment, flexibility, patience, and acceptance of the emerging circumstances.
- *Coordination* – The ability to bring people together safely, share information, and formulate appropriate and sustainable responses.
- *Speed* – The ability to be proactive, make rapid decisions, and implement learning quickly and efficiently.
- *Reflexivity* – The ability to accept positive failure, forgive, identify learning, and develop wisdom over time.

- *Strength* – The ability to accept personal responsibility and accountability for all thoughts, words, and actions, self-determine, and self-organise.
- *Endurance* – The ability to sustain effort over a long period of time whilst showing appropriate regard and concern for the welfare of Self and Other and the need to minimise harmfulness.

As you can see, the Six Lenses of Reflection and Learning are infused throughout the characteristics of agility. By creating a reflective and learning culture, they can be easily translated into agility when it is needed. Trying to shift organisational culture quickly in response to the need for agility is impossible if that culture has not been preconditioned to think, speak, and act with wisdom on a regular basis within a supportive environment.

Agility in Action - A case study: The National Resilience Taskforce

In March 2018, the Department of Home Affairs, in response to the Prime Minister’s desire to see significant improvements in natural hazards resilience at the National level, established the National Resilience Taskforce (NRT).

The NRT had a short window of 15 months in which to deliver on four major policy pieces of work that included:

- A co-designed National Risk Reduction Framework (NRRF)
- A comprehensive report on Australia’s vulnerability profile,
- A comprehensive set of national guidelines for assessing climate and disaster risk,
- A comprehensive blueprint for a National Climate and Disaster Risk Information Services Capability (NDRISC)

In addition to this, all necessary governance and resourcing issues required rapid resolution to establish the NRT.

The operating environment was contextualised as follows (examples only):

- *Political*: Highly contentious with some States and Territories
- *Economic*: Minimal budget that needed to be sourced from existing and constrained departmental funds.
- *Social*: Significant community interest in all aspects of the work
- *Technological*: Strong desire to see a significant strategic shift in the provision and coordination of climate and disaster risk data
- *Legal*: Constitutional barriers needed to be understood, expressed and communicated
- *Environmental*: Significant environmental issues surrounding controversial political views about climate change.

The NRT built a culture using the six Lenses of reflection and learning. The ethical premise of all of the policy advice was a commitment to non-harmfulness. For example, the NRRF

emerged from the realization that unless national risks were reduced (harm reduction), the Nation could not achieve the level of resilience the Government and community desired.

The views of many stakeholders were diverse and sometimes hostile to the strategic direction the Commonwealth wished to proceed with that required the NRT to exercise non-judgment so that it could hear, appreciate, and accept all views before committing to action.

Despite significant difficulties with the behaviour of some stakeholders, significant levels of patience were called for to ameliorate the anger aimed at the NRT as well as minimising any potential response in anger.

Difficult and robust conversations and the anger aimed at certain NRT members required the need to forgive others for what was seen as inappropriate language and behaviour arising from suffering.

NRT members held tri-weekly meetings to reflect upon and check in on each other's welfare whilst reminding ourselves that our fundamental purpose was to make a significant contribution to non-harmfulness through our policy advice.

Finally, as time went on the NRT developed a wisdom about what they were learning and how that learning could be applied to achieve greater good objectives.

In conjunction with the six lenses that helped shape the culture of the NRT, the six attributes of agility were also used and improved over time.

By taking the time to contextualise the operating environment, progressively reflecting upon, and learning from the individual and collective lived experiences of the NRT members, and by using the Six Lenses of Reflection and Learning in conjunction with the six attributes of agility, the NRT delivered on all of its commitments.

Proof of success was evidenced by full adoption of all policy advice and recommendations for all four major policy pieces nationally that included every State and Territory Government and the Commonwealth either at the political or senior bureaucratic level without amendment. These policies have been used extensively to shape the national resilience and risk reduction strategies and policies across Australia and were referenced extensively by the Royal Commission into the National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

Helpful Book References

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