

# HOW TO HARNESS

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On a recent road trip, I was listening to a podcast where the host posed the following question: “Are you a person who likes to go with the wind or who likes to be the wind?” Even though I was travelling alone, I found myself answering aloud, “Definitely BE the wind.” Perhaps, like me, you know the answer to this question without having to think too hard, but if you are unsure, let me explain. Do you wake up willing to go with the flow and see how your day unfolds? Or do you wake up with a specific idea of what you hope to accomplish or experience that day?

Great questions make us stop and think. They offer the opportunity to reflect on the values that drive our behaviours and influence how we show up. There is no right answer to this question. Rather, what matters is taking the time to reflect honestly on how “going with the wind” or “being the wind” is serving you. If you are someone who goes with the wind, you may be unsure of your destination, feel pulled in multiple directions, and be easily sidetracked from reaching your goals. Alternatively, if like me, you prefer to be the wind, you might be hyper-focused and risk sacrificing creativity for productivity and conformity, missing out on moments of spontaneity and serendipity.

John Dewey, an American philosopher and proponent of educational reform, believed that as individuals we don’t learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience. We have no time for creating space for reflection in our fast-paced, results-driven culture. Production, creation, action, and implementation are how we measure our worth, and as a result, we wear our busyness like a badge of honour. Who has time for reflection when there are not enough hours in the day to meet the needs of our clients and patients, let alone those of our team members? But what might be the pitfalls of this action-focused “be the wind” approach to leadership and life?

Before we explore the value of reflection, I want to pause and define reflection in the context of learning. Reflection is an internal process that involves thinking about our attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviours. It is critical to an individual’s learning process and, if used with positive intent, can improve communication, build trust, and improve patient outcomes. In 1984, David Kolb stated, “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.” He created Kolb’s Learning Cycle (Figure 1), a model that incorporates trial and error, concrete experience, reflection, and research to define the stages of learning.

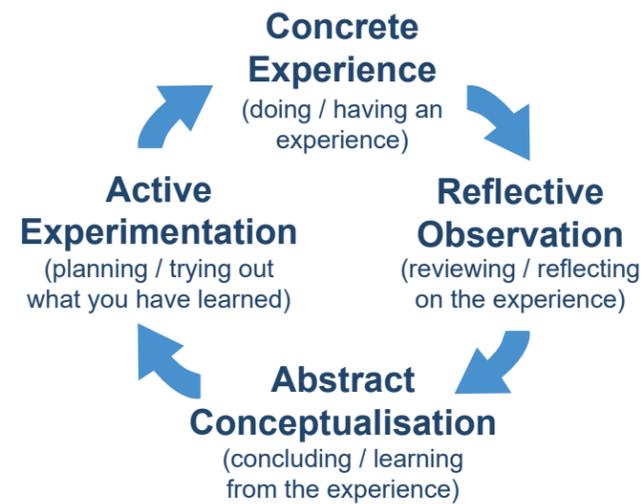


FIGURE 1: Kolb's Learning Cycle.

Creating space for both individual and team reflection is critical to becoming an agile, learning organization. It ensures we don’t dash madly off in the wrong direction or miss critical information that might have altered our plan. It provides an opportunity to explore our earlier beliefs, ingrained practices, and established patterns to evaluate their effectiveness. It provides a connection between what happened, what we wanted to happen, and what we can do in the future to alter the outcome and better serve our patients and clients. Finally, creating space for reflection gives our people the opportunity to share their experience, providing valuable perspective and creating the shared stories, artifacts, and symbols that form the fabric of our hospital culture.

Studies have shown the benefit of reflection in building authentic leaders and agile teams able to collaborate, innovate, and navigate complex challenges and uncertainty. Veterinary teams would be wise to embrace this research and incorporate opportunities for reflective learning as a practice standard. What exactly does reflection look like in a veterinary setting? How can leaders at all levels leverage it to engage their team, obtain knowledge, innovate, and improve?

# THE WIND

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IMPACT EFFICIENCY, DEBRIEFING ON NEGATIVE PATIENT OUTCOMES OR CLIENT EXPERIENCES, AND EVEN DISSECTING A CHALLENGING TEAM COMMUNICATION ISSUE.”

Creating a designated time to coach team members is the first step to leveraging the benefits of reflective learning. Depending on the situation, it can be used in a team setting or a more private venue with select team members. Regularly scheduled events like morning rounds, staff meetings, or scheduled team training sessions are a good place to start. The reflective learning process can be used in a variety of contexts in the clinical setting, such as exploring how hospital policies impact efficiency, debriefing on negative patient outcomes or client experiences, and even dissecting a challenging team communication issue. In a veterinary setting, practical use of Kolb’s learning cycle would look similar to Figure 2.

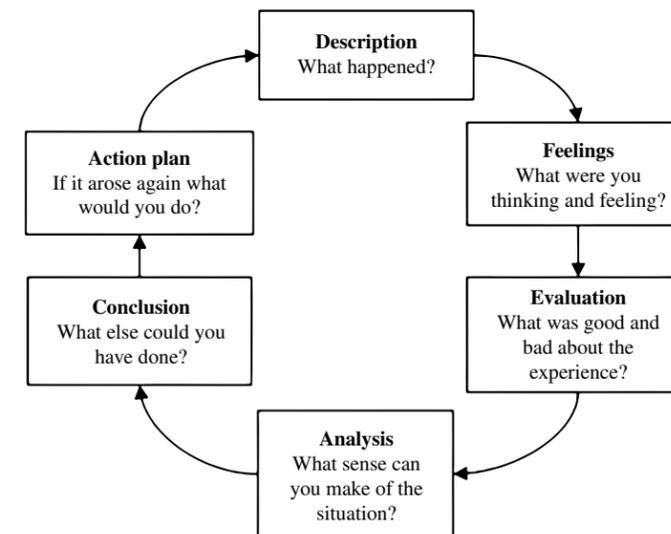


FIGURE 2: Experiential learning in action.

Leaders can coach team members to share their experience, starting with the facts of the situation or what happened, progressing to what each individual was thinking and feeling, and then evaluating what, in their opinion, was positive and negative about the experience. Participants must learn to listen with an open mind and suspend judgement while team members share their experience of the situation. From here the team can start to analyze and make sense of the situation, leading them to consider what else could have been done and how they might respond differently if the situation arose again.

I suspect many of you already practice reflection regularly, but you may do so unconsciously, reviewing in your head the conversation with a client that went poorly or the surgery where you were in the zone and it went great. Reflective learning can be applied to many different situations we encounter daily, both positive and negative. Following the steps outlined above will make your learning more concrete and help you come to terms with bad experiences and move on. In this way, you can build resilience and improve your overall well-being or that of your team. With practice, reflective practices that lead to experiential learning are a way to harness the power of the wind. Rather than trying to “be the wind” or just “going with the wind,” learn to leverage the wind to gain the lift you need. Then enjoy the ride as you view the world from a new perspective.

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