

## LEARNING FROM SUCCESS

Adapted from the presentation by Geneviève Tardieu in 2012

**Learning From Success (LFS) is a working method used by Jona Rosenfeld, an ATD Fourth World ally in Israel.** He taught this method to a group of full-time volunteers in a series of seminars in Pierrelaye, France.

**This working method aims to help volunteers unearth tacit knowledge, principles of action, and hidden theories that guide their working practices among those with a lived experience of poverty.**

Rosenfeld believes that the working practices of volunteers are exceptional because of their richness and perceptiveness, as well as the results they achieve. However, during his years as an ally of ATD Fourth World, he has observed that volunteers often lack the ability to critically reflect on the specific actions that lead to desirable results and are reluctant to identify their successes. As a result, they are ill-equipped to pass on their knowledge and practices.

**There is much to be gained by reflecting on and clarifying our practices.** It allows us to improve them-and, most importantly, pass them on to others. In understanding the inception of our practices and the precise conditions of their implementation, we can refine them.

This working method is based on the theory of **“knowledge in action.”** Donald Schön, an American theorist, educator, and a strong proponent of the theory, breaks down “knowledge in action” into two further working practices: “reflection in action” and “reflection on action.”

“Reflection in action” is the process of applying tacit knowledge, intuition, and improvisational skills to address complex and/or unique situations in real-time. This is on-the-spot problem-solving that does not solely rely on pre-existing theories or formal knowledge. It is a process of thinking and action simultaneously and is something that professionals frequently engage in, be they educators, managers, architects, or, in our case, ATD Fourth World volunteers.

“Reflection on action” is a retrospective analysis of actions taken, which allows individuals to make their tacit knowledge more explicit, refine their expertise, and adapt to future challenges. Ensuring that knowledge does not remain tacit and intangible also ensures that it can be passed on to others.” See: <https://marcr.net/marcr-for-career-professionals/career-theory/career-theories-and-theorists/schon-reflection-in-action-on-action-1983/>

Ultimately, “knowledge in action” refuses the separation between theory and practice; **principles always guide actions, though we are often unaware.** Understanding these principles is difficult but important.

### **How to “Learn From Success”**

**To apply the method, we must reflect on our own practices:** it is a re-reading of the action with added hindsight.

To start with, we must **describe the context** and reflect on what could be considered **a success.** We are all working to produce change. We must describe the context and situation precisely **before and after the action** and describe the **change achieved.**

There may be **objective and subjective criteria** to measure the change achieved. For example, in an ATD Fourth World Street library, after the action of a volunteer, there may be children who attend school more often. There may also be children who take a greater interest in the books. The first criterion is objective; the second is subjective. Both are equally important.

Using the objective and subjective criteria of change, people can then come together to think about and reach an agreement on "what success has been achieved."

An interesting aspect of this method is that it takes into account **many** elements that were not expected at the outset of an action.-

**These successes are very real and very important.**

During this process, **an action's negative consequences** are also reflected on.

After identifying a success, the volunteer or the person carrying out the action must relate as precisely as possible to what they did. Not *why* they carried out an action, as we are not looking for an explanation, but rather they should **describe in the greatest possible detail *what they did***. It is beneficial to have people not involved in the specific action ask the “practitioner” questions. This allows us to stand back and draw attention to what may seem obvious to the person who carried out the action. For example: "What did you say? What words did you use? How did you feel? How did others react?"

We can identify **key points** or **turning points** in the actions by asking questions and going into detail about how successes occurred.

From this, we then “derive” or uncover the principles of the action.

ATD Fourth World has **common action principles**-already identified, established, and handed on. This means that, for example, any well-trained volunteer of ATD Fourth World assisting in a street library has an established method of conduct. We also have **single action principles** which are specific to each of us. These principles inform who we are, how we feel, react, etc. It is particularly important to identify these principles in actions, even if they cannot be reproduced identically, they can inspire other actions.

The last step consists of spotting the failures, **unresolved issues**, and things to be improved. Thinking about the action inevitably leads to considering its failures. These must be taken as the starting point for planning future actions. This means looking at our actions differently, changing our priorities and using other means if we really want to resolve the problems we have defined.

**Failures must be formulated as learning questions.** For example, a child damages the street library computer. The question must be: "The child damaged the computer to attract attention. What should we do to respond to that child's need for attention?"

At that point, we must once again **consider the context and ask all those involved what their understanding of the situation is**. Following this reflection, **we must imagine new practices to**

deal with the failure. Here, we find ourselves in an anticipatory situation since we must **project ourselves into the future and plan our actions.**

At the end of this process, we must **become aware of how we learnt what we learnt.** It is the final step of knowledge, sometimes called meta-knowledge. It is the surest, best-proven and most effective stage of knowledge. Ultimately, reflecting on the action allows us to achieve meta-knowledge throughout the entire process.



The Unit for Learning from Success and  
Ongoing Learning in Human Service Organizations

## The First Method: Learning From Past Success - The Retrospective Method

### The "Learning from Success" Format of Inquiry:

- (1) Describing the organizational context
- (2) Identifying a success worthy of being learned, and defining the field of success
- (3) Concisely describing the success in terms of "before" and "after"
- (4) Identifying positive (objective and subjective) outcomes of the success
- (5) Identifying any negative "side effects" or the costs of success
- (6) Examining whether the "success" indeed justifies further learning
- (7) Detailing the actions that led to success
- (8) Identifying turning points between "before" and "after"
- (9) Deriving the common elements - "Principles of Action", that underlay the actions (described in stage 7) that led to success

(10) Identifying unresolved issues for further learning