

Using the STAR Method to Debrief Past Experiences

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Context: Freshmen and Sophomore students participating in counseling sessions through the Career Communities program

Keywords: career planning, advising, STAR method

Student Activity Time: 45-minute sessions or group discussions

Students used the STAR method to look back on previous experiences to explain what they did and what they learned from them in preparation for interacting with employers.

Introducing the Reflection Activity

Reflection is defined by some to be a way to look back to inform the future. By reflecting on past experiences, one can be better informed and prepared for the future. Through a freshman and sophomore centered portion of the Career Development Center at Stanford University, freshmen and sophomore students are introduced to the Situation, Task, Action, and Result (STAR) method to debrief previous experiences. This method is shared as a way to help students recognize how past experiences can be shaped for presentation on a resume, at a career fair, or as an instrument of personal reflection to direct their plans. The purpose of this reflection activity is for students to think about their previous experiences in such a way that helps them realize what skills they have gained and how their experiences can help to reveal their likes and dislikes, define their academic paths, support them in search of internships, and describe their experience to employers.

At any time during the school year, students have the opportunity to schedule one-on-one meetings or attend meet-ups (group discussions) with a counselor from the career center to discuss how to approach career building early in their academic career. Based on students’ goals in attending the session or meet-up, the counselor may introduce the STAR method. STAR stands for Situation, Task, Action, and Result and is a way to methodically describe and understand an experience. The Situation refers to the context of the experience—what was the project? The Task represents the specific items for which the student was responsible. The Action represents what exact actions the student took to complete the tasks and what role the student fulfilled (i.e. leader, delegate). The Results indicate the final outcome of the project, including specific accomplishments, newly developed or increased skills, or clarified interests.

The counselor asks the student during the meeting to review past experiences, whether academic projects or other employment experiences, using the STAR method. The counselor facilitates the conversation with the student and helps the student understand important points of their experience by providing feedback on their answers to each STAR component. Once students’ debriefs an activity, the counselor helps them apply it to whatever need they have such as filling out a

resume or preparing for an internship interview. The counselor also takes the opportunity to walk the students through how their experience may have revealed what they are most interested in – pointing them towards defining what they want to focus on during their time at school.

As a result of the reflection activity, students have the ability to make sense of what they have done in the past and apply that to the future as they pursue internship opportunities. Once students have mastered the STAR method, they have the ability to apply it to other parts of their life as a reflective tool to debrief other activities. Students also have the opportunity to reflect on portions of an experience that they liked, which may help them choose a path of study or internship that complements what they enjoy.

Recreating the Reflection Activity

	Description
1	Students reach out to the Career Center for help on career guidance such as internship preparation, or staff reaches out to students through events and email.
2	Schedule one-on-one meetings or group discussions with students.
3	Describe the STAR method and walk through one of the student’s experiences using it.
4	Help adapt those points for a student’s specific need such as a resume, conversation, or interview.

In the words of the Educator: Tips and Inspiration

Use the STAR reflection method for things other than an interview preparation method. While the STAR method can be a useful way for students to describe themselves succinctly to potential employers, it can also be helpful for other activities, such as understanding what major to pursue.

Think about results beyond just success metrics. Think about and reflect on experiences as skill building: what skills did you develop? Consider how your interests were clarified: do you want to pursue this further? It’s useful to use the STAR method for students that have had an experience that they didn’t like. For example, if they interned or were a leader in a campus club and they didn’t like it, being able to describe it using the STAR method gives them a chance to recognize the value in the experience.

Foster students’ thinking broadly beyond engineering. It’s ok for students to use experiences like being a cashier at an ice cream shop on a resume. You can use this method with students to support them in describing that experience in a way that shows that they reflected on the experience and can apply the skills they learned.