Modeling as Culture: Strengthening Culture by Making Learning Visible

In this installment, we're focusing on Modeling: the ways people demonstrate not only what they do, but also how they think, learn, solve problems, and grow. Modeling is the practice of showing, through our actions, the behaviors and values we want to characterize our community while sharing the knowledge, experiences, and insights that help others learn and develop.

An often-overlooked aspect of modeling is that it makes the invisible parts of knowledge and experience accessible to others. The questions we ask ourselves, the factors we consider, and the methods we use to navigate challenges often remain unseen. When these processes are shared openly, they create opportunities for others to build confidence, strengthen skills, and learn from shared experience.

Modeling shapes culture through both intentional actions and everyday interactions. While people in formal leadership roles are often looked to as examples, modeling is not limited to leaders. Each of us contributes to what feels normal, valued, and possible within our workplaces through the examples we set, the lessons we share, and the actions we reinforce.

Do people have opportunities to see how decisions are made, not just the decisions themselves?

Are we making our thinking, learning, and problem-solving visible in ways that help others grow?

Are we consistently demonstrating behaviors that show how we value the members of our community?

Let's explore how intentional modeling can strengthen learning, collaboration, and continuous improvement across our workplaces.

Quick Wins for Your Unit

Practical, high-impact ways to make learning and thinking more visible

We often learn as much from observing others as they do from formal instruction. By making thinking and learning more visible, teams can create additional opportunities for growth, knowledge-sharing, and capability-building in everyday work.

Observation also shapes how people understand workplace culture. People learn what an organization truly values by watching what happens every day. They notice how decisions are explained, whose ideas receive attention, how colleagues respond to mistakes, whether commitments are honored, and what happens when someone raises a concern. These everyday behaviors often communicate more powerfully than a statement of values or a set of expectations.

Here are a few actions your team can take this week to strengthen culture through modeling:

- **Explain the reasoning behind decisions.** When discussing priorities, recommendations, or next steps, take a moment to share how you arrived at your conclusion. Explaining the factors considered, tradeoffs weighed, or questions explored helps others understand the process behind the decision rather than only the outcome.
- **Share lessons learned along the way.** Learning often happens through adjustments, unexpected challenges, and new discoveries. When people talk openly about what they learned from a project, a meeting, or a difficult situation, they help others benefit from those experiences while reinforcing a culture of continuous improvement.
- **Normalize course corrections.** Acknowledge when you do not know something, have changed your mind, or need to correct an action. Statements such as, “I overlooked that perspective. Let me reconsider,” or “I interrupted you. Please finish your thought,” help make accountability visible. Demonstrating how people learn from mistakes, adjust their thinking, and repair interactions reinforces the idea that growth is an expected part of excellent work.
- **Make problem-solving visible.** Rather than presenting only solutions, share elements of the thinking that led there. Statements such as "Here's what I'm considering," "These are the questions I'm working through," or "This is the challenge I'm trying to solve" allow others to observe approaches that they can apply in their own work.
- **Highlight the evolution of the work.** Expertise is often built through practice, experimentation, and refinement. Sharing drafts, early ideas, evolving approaches, and discussing what changed along the way helps normalize the learning process, reinforcing the understanding that improvement and strong outcomes often develop over time.
- **Support independence through guidance.** One of the most powerful forms of modeling is helping others develop their own capabilities. Rather than immediately providing answers, consider sharing your approach, asking questions, or talking through your thought process. This helps others build confidence and develop skills they can apply independently in the future.
- **Demonstrate respect in routine moments:** Give credit for ideas, follow through on commitments, avoid interrupting, invite contributions from people who have not shared, and respect colleagues’ time and boundaries. Small actions repeated consistently become powerful cultural cues.

Try This with Your Team

Simple practices that turn experience into learning

Modeling does not require a formal training session or a leadership role. Small, intentional practices woven into existing conversations and workflows can help make thinking, learning, and growth more visible across teams.

- **10-minute “Visible Values” chats.** Choose one value your team wants to strengthen and discuss how it shows up in everyday work. Ask questions such as: *What does this*

value look and sound like in our day-to-day interactions? What actions would make it visible to others? Are there behaviors that might unintentionally communicate something different?

Translate the value into observable practices. For example, a team focused on collaboration might share materials in advance, explain how input shaped a decision, or create space for additional perspectives before closing a discussion.

End by identifying one behavior each person can practice more consistently. Revisit the conversation later to reflect on what the team is learning and how those actions are shaping the way people work together.

- **Reflection opportunities.** Create moments to share insights gained from recent experiences. This might happen after completing a project, navigating a challenge, or trying something new. Reflection helps teams capture knowledge and recognize learning as part of everyday work. Ask "*What would we carry forward?*" or "*What might we approach differently next time?*" to help surface lessons that everyone can learn from.
- **Visible thinking moments.** During meetings, project discussions, or one-on-one conversations, share the thinking behind your work by explaining how you approached a decision, evaluated options, or worked through a challenge. Making your reasoning visible helps others understand the process behind the outcome, learn from different approaches, and gain insight into the expertise that shapes the work.
- **Iteration reviews**. When appropriate, share work in progress, early ideas, or changes made along the way. Seeing how ideas develop helps others understand that strong outcomes are often shaped through exploration, feedback, and refinement. Asking "*What changed along the way?*" or "*What did we learn from this process?*" helps turn experience into shared learning.
- **Guided application:** When sharing knowledge or supporting someone learning a new task, move beyond simply explaining the process by creating opportunities for others to practice and apply what they have learned. Offering guidance while allowing space for others to make choices, ask questions, and develop their own approach helps turn experience into confidence and independence.
- **Knowledge exchange:** Expertise develops through experience, but much of what people know becomes automatic over time. Sharing key considerations, lessons learned, or strategies helps make that knowledge more accessible. Questions such as “What do you know now that you wish you knew earlier?” or “What have you learned that could help someone else?” create opportunities for shared learning across roles and experience levels.

See It in Action: Office for Research Administration Strategy

The ORAS team is using 1:1 leadership meetings as collaborative working sessions instead of formal status updates. These conversations create space to slow down, examine early thinking, and work through the details behind emerging strategies.

In these “Think Tank” conversations, team members focus on a single strategic pillar, walking through early-stage logic, surfacing dependencies, and exploring questions together. Rather than waiting until a strategy is fully formed, they make the thinking and problem-solving process visible while there is still room to learn and adjust.

By making the thinking and problem-solving that shape the work visible, ORAS is creating opportunities to learn from one another and see how strategies develop through questioning, exploration, and reflection. The practice reinforces that strong work does not always begin with a finished answer. It develops through an iterative process of thinking, learning, and adjustment.

Share Your Practice

We’d love to feature examples from across our research community.

👉 ovpr.spie@umich.edu to tell us what your team is doing to shape environments that reflect what you value.

(Adapted from: Project Zero. (n.d.). Cultures of thinking. Harvard Graduate School of Education. http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/the-8-forces-that-shape-group-culture and Ritchhart, R. (2015). Creating Cultures of Thinking: The 8 Forces We Must Master to Truly Transform Our Schools. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.)