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Personal Growth And Transformation

Don't Underestimate the Power of Self-Reflection

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Summary. Research shows the habit of reflection can separate extraordinary professionals from mediocre ones. But how do you sort which experiences are most significant for your development? To answer this questions, the authors asked 442 executives to reflect on... [more](#)

Empathy, communication, adaptability, emotional intelligence, compassion. These are all skills you need to thrive in the workplace and become a great leader. Time and again, we even hear that these capabilities are the key to making yourself indispensable — not just now but far into the future. Soft skills, after all, are what make us human, and as far as we know, can't be performed well by technologies like artificial intelligence.

Even so, one competency that is often less talked about is reflection. Research shows the habit of reflection can separate extraordinary professionals from mediocre ones. We would go so far as to argue that it's the foundation that all other soft skills grow from.

The practice itself is all about learning, looking back on the day (without bias or regret) to contemplate your behavior and its consequences. It requires sitting with yourself, taking an honest moment to think about what transpired, what worked, what didn't, what can be done, and what can't. Reflection requires courage. It's thoughtful and deliberate. Being at the "top of your game" only comes when you extract from your past how to engage the future.

To get its full benefits, you must make reflection a habit. But it's not simple. Generic questions like "What am I grateful for today? What did I learn? What could I have done better?" are often too general to be helpful.

So, what should you reflect upon? At least 1,000 things happen during the course of the week. How do you sort which experiences are most significant for your development? Simply put, which of the myriad of things that flew across your life are worthy of scrutiny?

What Our Research Says

To answer these questions, we asked 442 executives to reflect on which experiences most advanced their professional development and had the greatest impact on making them better leaders.

Their responses were genuine. They revealed embarrassing stories, abject fiascos, thoughtless gaffes, youthful mistakes, and careless decisions — but also smart decisions, soaring accomplishments, and meaningful interactions. By and large, their reflections were self-effacing and deeply felt.

We processed these reflections through the text analysis program NVivo, a powerful software used in fields like sociology and education, to detect sentimental themes among the stories submitted. We also asked doctoral students to code the stories according to sentiment. As a final step, management professors reviewed the accuracy of that coding.

Three distinct themes arose through our analysis: surprise, frustration, and failure. Reflections that involved one or more of these sentiments proved to be the most valuable in helping our leaders learn and grow in their careers.

What did it mean to be surprised, frustrated, and fail in this context?

Surprise

Many things surprise us, but in our study, most leaders were moved by moments that greatly derailed their expectations. One participant expressed “shock” that a well-respected, even-keeled colleague blew their stack about a minor issue. Another was surprised when a reasonable request was rejected. And yet another claimed “shock” when the market share of a proven service dropped.

Their experiences reflected this fundamental truth: As humans, we tend to naively hypothesize about what will happen next based on what has already occurred. As a part of our cognitive nature, we use logic and reason to “describe, explain, predict, and control” in order to project some semblance of power over what goes on in our lives.

When we are mistaken, we are surprised — and mistakes, lapses in judgements, and wrongful assumptions are worth our reflection.

Failure

This brings me to the next sentiment: failure. While surprise can be kept internal, many of participants associated failure with making a mistake visible to the masses. One leader shared a memory of how being too involved in “organizational politics” led a program he was leading to fail. He lamented: “I messed up, big. I focused on the idea, but not the details. I had to own it. It was painful, but I never made that mistake again.”

Failure, then, is often behavioral, and it manifests as a mistake. The good news is that we all make mistakes. Mistakes provide raw evidence of what we should *not* do in the future. Mistakes allow us to learn by “negative example” otherwise known as “errorful learning.” Much has been written about the value of failure as a learning experience because it’s temporary. Naturally, we can’t learn if we don’t take the time to stop and intentionally reflect.

Frustration

Frustration occurs when our thoughtful analysis is criticized. Or someone parks in our space, our flight is delayed, we get stuck in traffic, or our loved one is late picking us up. The leaders we studied conveyed frustration with things like internal delays that threatened product launches, budget inequities, and corporate offices that didn’t seem to understand field realities.

Moments when our leaders felt frustration became growth opportunities upon reflection. That is, opportunities for improvement, change, innovation, and even to develop other soft skills like communication, problem-solving, and patience.

It’s important to understand that, at the root of frustration, lies our goals, or the objects of our ambitions and efforts. Goals reflect our values, and our values make up the compass that keeps us connected to our higher purpose in life and at work. We’re

frustrated when our goals are thwarted and we're not able to get what we want, but pushing through that frustration and finding other ways to cope and move forward results in our growth.

Building a Weekly Practice

Surprise, frustration, and failure. Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Head, heart, and hands. These parts of you are constantly in motion and if you don't give them time to rest, they will surely fatigue. Like a muscle, your mind needs reflection to reenergize and grow stronger.

Here are a few simple practices to get you started on building a regular habit of reflection.

1) Keep a journal.

Whenever you are surprised, frustrated, or fail, pause and note the feeling. As soon as you are able, jot down what happened in enough detail to recall the instance in as much accuracy as possible. Note the feelings in your body — a sour stomach, a hot head, an impulse to cry — as well as any immediate thoughts that may be racing through your mind.

Try to identify the *why* behind the emotion. What about the event triggered these feelings in you? Were your expectations derailed? Did things not go your way? Did you make a mistake?

2) Set an hour aside each week to review your notes.

Don't skip it. Block out the time on your calendar in order to avoid other disturbances.

You can prepare yourself for this review by setting realistic expectations: It's going to be rigorous and honest. It may even be painful to examine your shortcomings, but also know you can't get better until you know what to get better at.

3) Don't just re-read your journal entry.

Add to it. In retrospect, are there things about the situation that you are able to see differently? Press yourself. What went wrong?

Were your initial observations correct or do they reveal something else that may have been going on, something you couldn't see in the heat of the moment? Try to think of yourself as neutral observer.

Now the question becomes: How can I make sure this doesn't happen again? In the case of failure, you may find there is a mistake you can learn from. In the case of surprise, you may discover that you need to recalibrate unrealistic expectations. In the case of frustration, you may figure out that you need to get better at adapting to the unexpected.

Go easy on yourself. Reflection — well and truly done — is ego-bruising. Always remember that excellence is achieved by stumbling, standing up, dusting yourself off, then stumbling again. If you study those stumbles, you're much less likely to fall down in the future.

Pro tip: If you are looking for more resources, here are a few popular and proven reflections toolkits that may help guide your reflection practice.

- Gibbs Reflective Cycle explores six stages of an experience: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusions, and action plan.
- What? So what? Now what? are three reflective stages of thinking about an experience, its implications, and what it means for the future.
- Integrated Reflection Cycle has four steps: the experience, your actions, relevant theory, and preparation for the future.
- The 5R Framework of Reflection, Reporting, Responding, Relating, Reasoning, and Reconstructing is yet another toolkit.

Reflection is executive functioning. True courageous reflection galvanizes your willpower. It promotes continuous self-awareness, empowers you, ensures you are valued, and gives you the self-awareness you need to quicken achieving your potential.

If you, as a young professional, want to ascend, then do what those who are successful do. Reflect on surprise, frustration, and failure. Make it part of your life.

It will pay off.

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