

Executive Reflection & Journaling

Most executives today find themselves busy all the time fighting fires', moving from problem to problem or event to event with little or no time for thoughtful, quiet reflection. Numerous studies have pointed out the necessity of taking a break from the action to get the 'long view' on the situation. Common wisdom tells us that it is only by stepping back a bit that we are able to distinguish the forest from the trees.

The great philosopher Socrates put it this way:

"The unexamined life is not worth living."

This quote has several implications for all of us seeking to become more effective leaders.

- First it suggests that we must take the time to break from the harried frenzy of our day-to-day activities and seek the precious few minutes of solitude and quiet reflection necessary to refuel our passion and our vitality.
- Second, by using this private time, we are able to step back and reflect on how we are spending our most precious resource – our time – and with what results.
- Third, it gives us the opportunity to ask the most important questions all executives must ask if they are to become enabling and effective leaders:
 - How am I spending my time?
 - How should I be spending my time?
 - How do I want to be spending my time?

The first of these 'time spend' questions is best answered by keeping track of your activities in a small notebook (paper or electronic) where you jot down each day, each activity and the time you spent in that effort. You should collect these 'time spends' over at least a two-week period, at the end of which you will most likely see a pattern emerging and you will be able to group your work efforts into 'buckets'. This exercise provides you with the opportunity to map out and see exactly how you spend your executive time on a daily basis.

The second 'time spend' question is an open-ended exercise designed to get you thinking about the 'charge' you accepted when you become an executive. You assumed responsibility for 'getting certain things done' at a high level of influence, impact and result. As you ponder this question you may find a certain 'disconnect' between what you know you should do to move your team and your company forward and what you are actually doing each day (remember 'time spend question 1'). This is an opportunity to actively reflect on your most important and purposeful mission and re-dedicate yourself to those greater influence, greater impact, and greater result activities.

The final 'time spend' question is meant to help you recognize not only what is driving you – your 'personal fire in the belly' – but also what you are envisioning for your team, your company and yourself. The goals of the business owner/manager are often intertwined with the goals of the business. Yet often we lose sight of the lofty ideals, high passion and strong vision that are at the center of effective leadership. This provides you with the opportunity to renew, refresh and reinvigorate your leadership passion and vision so that not only your company and your team, but you as well, are able to find professional satisfaction through achievement and accomplishment.

Executive Reflection & Journaling

The best way to make Reflection and Journaling an effective and meaningful part of your professional life is really quite simple:

1. Dedicate 30 minutes during each work day (yes, during the day, not before or after – see accompanying Strategic Advice about ‘Delegating without Abdicating’) where you will close your office door, silence your phone(s), dim your computer screens, and put away your tablet and smartphone as well as your spreadsheets, budgets or proposals. Dim the lights in your office, if music soothes you then have soft melodic music in the background.
2. Close your eyes and reflect on the three ‘time spends’ questions for at least 10 minutes. Do not force your thoughts but let your mind naturally flow through them as you seek the patterns and templates that emerge.
3. Spend 10-15 minutes writing down your reflections either in a paper journal or if you prefer, in an electronic document. Be thoughtful as you write but do not seek journalistic perfection – this is not the next great American novel but instead the story of your executive work efforts and accomplishments.
4. Spend the final 5-10 minutes again in quiet reflection, this time focused on the patterns and observations from your journal. Don't ‘jump to action’ – just let yourself naturally ponder and thoughtfully wander through these notes.
5. Before you ‘turn the office back on’ take three deep, slow and full breathes through your nose exhaling slowly and calmly through your mouth. Open your eyes and return to your day relaxed and invigorated.

If you commit to this exercise you will see results in your company and in your own life. You will naturally focus your energies on the activities that have the most impact and influence within your business; you will be calmer, more poised, self assured and relaxed; and you, your team and your company will achieve more satisfying and productive results.

Remember, it takes 90 days to make or break a habit.