

How Looking Back Prepares Leaders for the Future

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The leaders and managers in your company can best prepare for what's next this year by intentionally pausing to reflect on what happened last year. For example, researchers from the Kellogg School of Management and the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, discovered there is tremendous power in reflecting and asking the specific question: what if? "*What if X, Y, or Z didn't exist or didn't happen?*" Their study found that employees became more engaged and committed to the company when they were asked to imagine what life would be like if the company never existed. By reflecting on possibilities in the past, they became more motivated to produce in the present.

In today's fast-paced and highly competitive corporate environment, it's never been more important for your leaders to push pause and reflect on what happened last year in order to best plan for the year ahead. Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of Ikea, said, "The most dangerous poison is the feeling of achievement. The antidote is to every evening think what can be done better tomorrow."

Reflective thinking can prepare leaders to thrive in the following five ways. Feel free to share these with leaders on your organizational team:

1. Gives True Perspective.

A leader needs to look back in the past year and ask questions: What were their successes? What did they learn? It's important to reflect on experiences because human beings have the tendency to take things for granted. When leaders reflect, they're able to put an experience into

perspective. In addition, by asking themselves these questions a leader can gain a new appreciation for things that before went unnoticed. They can recognize and appreciate the sacrifices of others.

2. Gives Emotional Integrity.

Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks said, “Risk more than others think is safe. Dream more than others think is practical.” Few people have good perspective in the heat of an emotional moment. Most individuals who enjoy the thrill of an experience try to go back and recapture it without first trying to evaluate it. Likewise, those who survive a traumatic experience usually avoid similar situations at all costs, which sometimes ties them into emotional knots. Reflective thinking enables leaders to distance themselves from the intense emotions of particularly good or bad experiences and stop carrying around emotional baggage.

3. Gives Confidence in Decision-Making.

“Whether you think you can, or think you can’t—you’re right.” Henry Ford’s classic statement spotlights how a leader’s confidence affects results. Every leader must make snap judgments from time to time—and later wonder if he or she did the right thing. Reflective thinking can help to diffuse that doubt. After reflecting on an issue, a leader doesn’t have to repeat every step of the thinking process when faced with it again. Mental road markers compress the process and speeds up thinking time— and it give greater confidence. And over time, it can also strengthen that seemingly magical leadership ability--intuition. To best reflect on decisions, ask these questions:

- What factors played a role in that decision?
- What steps did they take in making that decision?
- Was that decision a good one? Why or why not?

4. Helps Keep the Big Picture in Mind.

Richard Branson, the founder of Virgin Group, says, “My biggest motivation? Just to keep challenging myself. I see life almost like one long University education that I never had—everyday I’m learning something new.” Branson sees the big picture and interprets experiences in terms of how they fit into that big picture. Reflective thinking puts ideas and experiences into a more accurate context. It encourages leaders to pondering what had been done and observed. If a person who loses his job reflects on what happened, he may see a pattern of events that led to dismissal. She may better understand what happened, why it happened, and what things were her responsibility. If he also looks at the incidents that occurred afterward, he may realize that in the larger scheme of things, he’s better off in his new position because it better fits his skills and desires. Without reflection, it can be very difficult for leaders to see that big picture and make better decisions going forward.

5. Takes a Good Experience and Makes It a Great Experience.

Playwright William Shakespeare wrote, "Experience is a jewel, and it had need be so, for it is often purchased at an infinite rate." Yet, experience alone does not add value to a leader's growth. It's not necessarily experience that is valuable; it's the insight leaders gain because of the experience. Reflective thinking turns experience into insight. An experience becomes valuable when it informs or equips leaders to meet new experiences. Looking back enables leaders to turn whatever happened last year into improvements for the year to come.

Encourage the leaders and managers in your company to set time aside for reflective thinking, free of distraction. The process requires some self-discipline and focused time, but it's one of the most effective ways to look back in order to prepare for the future.

REFERENCES

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