

Sandra Davis on the power of reflection

First, I have a story. I want you to picture this: I was in the office of a really impressive CHRO leader in the energy industry. We were about to go to dinner, and she said, “Oh wait, give me just a few minutes. I have something else I need to do. You can just wait here in my office.” I thought she might have another phone call to make or an email to send, but no, she pulled out a moleskin journal and started writing. Intrigued, I later asked her whether she was preparing thoughts for the next day or making a to-do list. “Oh no,” she said. “I started this practice a couple of years ago. Every day I record my learnings from the day. It could be anything. . . what went well, what did not, what I need to do differently tomorrow, or something to pursue further. When I don’t reflect and capture those priceless learnings from each day, I lose them.” Wow, what a great practice and I learned a valuable lesson that day.

I have often called reflection the most underutilized leadership muscle in Corporate America. You can have experience after experience as you embark on learning for yourself, but if you never stop to distill what you learned or what you need to remember going forward, you’ve wasted the learning opportunity. Don’t let that new experience you are embarking on just be a check-the-box, now-that’s-done activity. Take the time to reflect, learn, and capture what you learned, so you can apply it again.

Now so many leaders whom we coach at MDA say, “I don’t have time to think or do that.” How long do you suppose it took her to write her reflections? Five minutes? 10 minutes? Even finding 15 minutes once a week to build a habit of intentionally reflecting will put you miles ahead. Make it into a ritual or practice in whatever way makes sense for you: Writing, telling someone, recording a message to yourself in whatever rhythm makes sense. My client did this daily. . . I’m more of a once a week and some choose once a month for an hour. The magic is in the looking back, capturing what you learned, and carrying it forward, and I can tell you there are times reflecting leads to some “ahas” I would not have otherwise had.

Here are some questions to get you started. . .

Try questions about recent events:

1. What happened today?
2. What happened that worked really well?
3. Why was that and how do I repeat it next time?
4. What happened that left me frustrated or feeling incomplete?
5. What can I learn from that?
6. What was my role in that outcome and what could I have done to produce a different one?

Try questions about others:

1. Who impressed me today?
2. What did they do and how might I tell them?
3. Who could have been more effective and what ideas do I have for them?
4. When can I talk to them?



Try questions that are about curiosity:

1. What am I curious about or what do I wonder about?
2. What might I do to learn more about that?
3. Who might think about this differently?
4. What conclusions did I reach and what data or input do I still need to be able to rethink this?

And finally, try questions for engaging others with you:

1. Whom do I need to share these reflections with?
2. Who else might have insights for me?

We all want to learn and to grow. As leaders, we are all works in progress. So let me leave you with a favorite quote from one of the most significant educational thinkers of the 20th century, John Dewey. He said, “We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.” I look forward to hearing your stories about building this leadership muscle.