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When Doing Nothing is the Right Thing

From: Inc.com, 2007

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Take time out to learn from every experience and apply that learning in the future -- and in your business.

The practice of reflection, like many skills that make a leader more effective, doesn't always come naturally. Some people never stop doing long enough to reflect while others spend so much time reflecting, they never start doing. The key is to find balance between these two extremes and put reflection to work for you.

While it may sound like some New Age practice, reflection is basically just structuring time to stop what you're doing long enough to assess what's working, what's not and why so that you can adjust future actions in order to achieve a better outcome. In other words, reflection is taking time out to learn from every experience so that you can apply that learning in the future.

Look before you leap

Human beings are natural problem solvers. We start looking for things to change as soon as we identify a problem. Often labeled as “drive” or “initiative,” this tendency is applauded in many cultures. It's exactly this tendency that makes taking time to reflect so necessary.

Without taking this time out, we often find ourselves elbow-deep in solutions before we realize we're working on the wrong problem. Taking time out to reflect first can help to ensure that time, effort and money aren't wasted in the long run.

Challenge the status quo

Questioning our decisions and assumptions around an issue, especially before we've even gotten started, can be challenging. Once we form a mindset, we look for validation of that mindset. Over time, we reinforce our norms to the point that we can't see beyond them. When this happens, we stop learning.

Whether you're leading a whole company or managing a staff of one, you want to avoid falling (and bringing anyone with you) into this trap. You can make sure you're not discouraging your people from questioning organizational norms by structuring time to

reflect on a project as a group before it starts, as it progresses and when it's finished. By modeling that it's okay to challenge accepted assumptions at any time, we can create opportunities to learn even before we know we need to learn, which is key to creativity and innovation.

Be the change you want to see

If you want to encourage this type of reflection in your organization, you must first model it yourself. This isn't always easy thanks to a culture that doesn't view sitting around pondering a problem as being all that productive. The key to changing that perception is being transparent about the reflection process and communicating widely when you see benefit.

You can start on the individual level. For example, when you identify some behavior in yourself that you need to change in order to be more effective at your job, be honest with others about it. This models that it's okay to admit when you're not on the right track and that there's no shame in changing your behavior as you learn more information about yourself and the situation. Contrary to the opinions of some political pundits, modifying strategy midcourse is not flip--flopping; it's learning in real time.

To know where to move next, you have to know where you are now

In order to improve future performance, you must have metrics in place against which you can measure current execution. This is never truer than in a rapidly changing situation. Constant evaluation of strategy and tweaking of execution is what helps companies gain the competitive edge that can result in a gain in market share. Many organizational development experts agree that the ability to learn and make adjustments in real time -- a.k.a. agility -- is the most competitive advantage any organization can have.

Peter Senge introduced this concept in the 1990s saying that “the successful organization must (and does) continually adapt and learn in order to respond to changes in environment and to grow.” Consider that the opposite of agility is reaction. Reaction is defined as “a reverse or opposing action with the tendency to return to a former state.” No organization wants to expend time or money only to end up back where they started, but because we tend to react before we truly clarify the problem, it happens more often than we like to admit.

Until it's a habit, pencil it in

Until reflection becomes second nature, consider structuring time into your late afternoon to reflect on your accomplishments and personal interactions of the day. Make a list of what you think you handled well and what you didn't, and how you think you could do better in the future. By turning your observations into behavior goals, you consciously learn from your experiences. Learning is figuring out what you need to do in order to do it better. Reflection is the process that drives that learning.

Taking it to the next level

Once you've made reflection a personal habit, begin applying this skill to projects you are managing by structuring group reflection activities at critical junctures.

Before beginning, have your team ask clarifying questions to determine if the right problem is actually being addressed. Set up metrics that will be used to determine whether you're achieving the desired end result as you go along.

In the middle of the initiative, ask the team to step back and challenge the assumptions on which the project was based. Make sure you're on track by measuring your performance on the metrics you set up at the start.

And at the project's completion, evaluate the team's performance honestly using the metrics as well as open discussion. If it was a success, have members articulate why and question how it could have been even better. If it was a failure, discuss why and write out what could have been done differently.

In addition to improving performance on current and future projects, structuring this time to reflect and question at all three phases of the process creates valuable learning opportunities all along the way.

Do it again, and again, and again

Even if you aren't consciously taking time to reflect, you learn from repetition. Adding reflection to the process significantly increases both the quality and the speed of the learning, producing learning that can be quickly transferred from theory into action. Anyone who's ever done a well-designed business simulation will agree that all the learning takes place during the debriefing where people get to discuss what just happened.

The repetition and reflection learning process looks like this: 1) you do; 2) you reflect on what you did; 3) you identify what you think you could have done differently to get a better outcome; 4) you do it again, a little differently and hopefully a little better thanks to the learning you gained from your previous experience. To learn even more, you do it all over again. There's no question that the most sustainable learning is created through repetition and reflection.

Shift your perception: It's not a mistake; it's a learning experience

There's a commonly told story in executive education circles about an executive who brought his letter of resignation to the CEO after it became public that a project that he was leading had cost the company \$20 million dollars. The CEO refused to accept his resignation -- citing the \$20 million he'd just spent on the executive's education!

This CEO was modeling to his entire organization that mistakes are something to be learned from. This paradigm also raises the bar on expectations for future performance, which is the goal of all organizational learning initiatives.

When organizations view challenges and setbacks as learning opportunities, they are far more likely to be agile, a characteristic of successful organizations. By constantly learning and adjusting to meet the market's changing demands, these agile learning organizations are much less likely to find themselves in the position of having to make monumental change, which is far more difficult (and costly) than taking on smaller changes on a more frequent basis.

Here's an analogy that we can all relate to: Wouldn't you rather be faced with losing five pounds than 25? Although both outcomes resulted from the same behavior, the change that has to be achieved to accomplish the latter will be significantly more difficult and time consuming than if action had been taken earlier in the game.

Don't know where to start? Try peer coaching

Like many life and leadership skills, the ones that sound the simplest are often the most daunting. One way to learn the art of reflection is through peer coaching. In one method I've seen used very successfully, groups have each person present in just a few sentences a problem they are currently working on. The others in the group can only ask clarifying questions. No one can give advice or make suggestions; they can only ask questions. It's amazing how difficult this exercise can be, thanks to our natural problem-solving tendencies.

In addition to teaching the value of reflection, peer coaching like this can also help people learn the value of asking thoughtful, clarifying questions -- a skill from which everyone in the organization can benefit.

Using reflection to increase self-awareness

It's more natural to draw on reflection as a tool when we're stuck or after a failure, but don't discount what success can teach you. Reflection on our successes can teach us a lot about ourselves. Probably one of the most valuable leadership skills, self-awareness is being conscious of what you're good at while acknowledging what you still have yet to learn.

When you practice self-awareness, you're modeling that it's okay to admit you don't know everything and that we all have room for improvement. This can net you the trust of others and increase your credibility -- both critical to leadership effectiveness.

When you can use reflection to continuously tweak your behavior and improve your performance, you've reached the point where reflection is a real skill. Remember: Organizations are made up of individuals. When you and others in your organization begin to incorporate your daily learning into your next day's performance, you begin to become a learning organization. As Peter Senge and others have duly noted, the ability to learn and make adjustments in real time --a.k.a. agility -- is the most competitive advantage any organization can have.

So take some time to put your feet up and start reflecting today. Remember, sometimes doing “nothing” is the best thing you can be doing.

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