

STOP MAKING MISTAKES

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Pillar Consulting, April 2011

Imagine being able to accurately predict what would happen before taking a certain action. Imagine being able to adjust course mid-decision so you could achieve a better outcome. Imagine learning from your mistakes in such a way that you not only overcome the current mistake, but also achieve more success because of it. All of these scenarios are within the reach of everyone. Unfortunately, few people take the steps to actually do them.

So how exactly can someone predict the future, harness the present, and use the past as a springboard for success? The answer lies in the art of reflection.

Reflection is a way of learning from your mistakes and your successes in the course of your life and in your business. It means looking at your experiences to make informed decisions about what to do, when to do it, and why it should be done. It's about stepping back, taking it all in, and looking ahead. Ultimately, reflection brings clarity, and clarity leads to sound decisions.

Think of reflection as the art of extraction. You are extracting knowledge and learning right out of your own experiences, squeezing daily events for every ounce of learning they have to offer. Studying your own experiences by reflecting on them allows you to move faster toward your goals instead of having to try, try, try again until you get it right.

To some degree, reflection happens naturally, but it is far more powerful as a business tool when you understand how to steer your reflection purposefully to make the most of your talent, experiences, and business knowledge.

THE ART OF PRACTICING REFLECTION

To practice reflection, you simply choose an event or scenario that will impact you and your company. Then think about the event in advance, be conscious about the experience in the moment, debrief the event afterwards to see what there is to learn, and prepare for an even more successful experience next time. In this manner, your learning "curve" should not be a curve at all but a continuously moving cycle of thinking-and-acting-and-thinking-and-acting-and-thinking-and-acting.

That's how we learn. Researchers call this:

- *Reflection for action*, or thinking before you act.
- *Reflection in action*, or noticing your thoughts and feelings right in the middle of the action. Like a jazz musician, you play off the events of the moment, improvising as you perform.

- *Reflection on action* or the process of looking *back* at your experiences to see what there is to learn so you can apply it in the future.

For business professionals, taking the time for reflection is essential for long-term success. When you're skimming along, trying to make a profit, and making all the daily decisions, you're going through the motions but not really reflecting on them. As such, you could be missing opportunities, trading results for what's urgent (firefighting), working too much, and/or sacrificing your health and relationships in the name of something else that's less important. These are the kinds of mistakes you'll pay for later – and they're usually the ones you can undo.

If all you do is manage fires all day, you're not being reflective. And if you're not reflective in your job or business, then you won't be the one who gets the promotion or who creates the new product or service. The people and companies that get the promotions and create new offerings are the ones who have new ideas. You don't get innovative ideas by answering emails all day or dealing with one crisis after another.

So let's say, for instance, you want to evaluate your company's advertising strategy. To do so with the art of reflection, you would do the following:

1. *Reflect for action.* Think about any new advertising you want to do ahead of time. Decide such things as your specific goals of advertising, how long you'll test a certain medium, and which advertising venues your customers typically deem credible.
2. *Reflect in action.* In the midst of your advertising campaign, stay cognizant of your goals and intentions. See if you need to adjust course midway.
3. *Reflect on action.* After the specified timeframe you already identified, ask yourself:
 - How did it go?
 - What went well?
 - What didn't go as well?
 - What would you do differently next time?

Repeating this pattern again and again will eventually help you learn what you need to achieve your vision.

THE BENEFITS OF REFLECTION

How exactly does reflection help you be a better leader and have a better business? The benefits of reflection are many:

- *You avoid mistakes.* Reflective leaders and business owners are rarely blindsided. You give yourself the chance to weigh options and consider consequences before making a big decision.
- *You fill in the gaps.* Through your reflection, you will discover not just what you need to do, but also what you know and what you don't know. Once you can see what's missing to help you be successful, be it information, education, resources, funding, or connections, you can go out and get it.
- *You are lighter on your feet.* Many times people struggle with a decision. Should we or shouldn't we? Which way is best? What should we do? Reflection is a big stop sign to keep you from running in circles. The more reflective you are, the faster you can see how each and every option does or does not advance your goals. You make a decision and get back into action while everyone else chews on their options.
- *You learn by leaps and bounds.* Reflection is a way of learning that cuts out wasted time and unnecessary action. If you rely on learning-by-doing, you have to *do* a lot before you can *learn* a lot. If you couple learning-by-doing with reflection, however, your learning is more condensed, and therefore, faster.

The good news is that being reflective doesn't mean you have to go into the woods for a week to assess how you and your professional pursuits are advancing. Reflection is possible in a half hour here, a day there, or even a few minutes every now and then.

The bottom line is that if you're reflective, you can live the life you want and have the professional success you desire. But if you're not reflective, you may later regret your life's choices and may pay dearly for business mistakes. You can choose to stay on the same path you're currently on, or you can see the path you really want and take the steps to get there. The choice is yours. Reflect on it...and then choose wisely.

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