

The Need for Reflection

C-level leaders must take time to reflect on what matters in order to better serve their employees and customers.

Even Bill Gates does it.

Rachel, a bright executive, moved swiftly up the corporate ladder, gained responsibility for a large division in her company, relocated, and quickly adapted. Yet, for a few months, Rachel has been struggling. She's having trouble communicating effectively with a key manager. She has tried a number of approaches to establish a good working relationship with this talented manager, but she just can't get through to him.

When she speaks about her struggle, it's clear to Rachel that the issue she has been confronting has nothing to do with her manager. It concerns *her*. "It's my internal sense of clarity and direction that I'm having difficulty finding," she says. "My ineffectiveness with that manager is just a by-product. It's not about him, it's about me."

For Rachel, the lights turned on when she realized that the issue she faced was not "doing" things differently; rather, it was finding a new, more powerful sense of "being." It wasn't a business skill to be learned from others; it was a new knowledge of self that she was looking for. For help in that search for self-knowledge, Rachel approached me.

As I coached Rachel, I challenged her to clarify and describe the things that were absolutely essential for her. I helped Rachel to explore her values. What she took from that exercise was a tremendous sense of self-discovery, liberation, and strength. I knew that Rachel had found a more authentic voice, and the results were thrilling.

Rachel's discovery

Just one week after my meeting with Rachel, she was cruising at a different altitude. Her focus and enhanced effectiveness surprised even her. "It's as though I have new amperage at my core, and there's a kind of grace and joy that accompanies all that I do," she says. "My

communication is clearer and more confident. It's not an act. I have a compelling inner sense of what is important, of my values, and of what I cannot compromise. People respond to me differently. I haven't really changed a lot of what I say. It's just that I'm able to come out from a different place. The presence, the conviction, and the energy come from the inside, and people can't help but notice."

Action 24/7

Like Rachel, many executives live a fast-paced life. Their lives are filled with action, but they leave little time for reflection. They're so tuned in to demands from the outside that they no longer hear their intuition from the inside. They're chasing "what works" but are disconnected and displaced from "what matters."

A century ago, when more people lived in agricultural communities, the seasons took care of the imbalances of life. The fall moved into winter, and it was time to reflect. Life was balanced.

Now, our 24/7 fast-paced environments have created a breed of people, and a breed of executives, who suffer from an imbalance: a lot of action with little or no reflection.

The consequences of our living and working in such environments lie around us in multiple unhealthy ways:

- compromised health
- stress and anxiety
- burnout
- misunderstandings and conflicts
- ineffective communication
- ethical breakdown
- accidents
- loss of productivity
- bad service
- stupid system failures.

And the list doesn't end there. It may sound simplistic, but if you take

time to reflect, you may save yourself from many of those syndromes.

More art than science

To learn, you have to step into the unknown, which is often scary. That's the reason I think many executives are apprehensive about allowing themselves to take part in leadership retreats. In addition, executives feel they're too busy to stop, slow down, and reflect on their core values and the direction of their organizations. However, there's a surging interest behind the idea of pausing for reflection. At the ASTD 2004 International Conference & Exposition, keynote speaker Henry Mintzberg advocated the need for reflection when he stated that slowing down to reflect allows people to "be rooted in their own cultures, appreciate others' [cultures], and see their organizations more deeply."

So, what types of activities happen at these retreats?

Life-centering moments

In this activity, retreaters gather in groups of two or three to explore how a significant moment in their lives sculpted one of their core values. Participants give a title to their tale, which helps to focus the story, and are encouraged by the listeners to provide story details, along with descriptions of how the storyteller felt. As the story unravels, the teller reveals what he or she believes to be the lesson of the story. Listeners provide feedback by identifying the virtues they found in the story and the meaning gleaned from the storyteller.

The essence of facilitating leadership development is to help leaders reconnect with their unique and natural discovery process. Life-centering stories are a tool designed to help rekindle that natural growth process.

Leader as coach

Today's managers understand that honing their coaching competence is vital if they're to successfully retain and nurture the best talent in their organizations. After finding the power of reflection, learning to enter the coaching space is the next step. Thus, a five-step coaching practice is often included in retreat experiences.

Step 1: The coaching mindset. The facilitator invites the teams to create individual coaching tenets, such as the following:

- "As a coach, I focus on strength, growth, and opportunity."
- "The people I coach are whole; nothing is broken or needs fixing. They're naturally creative and resourceful."

16 Benefits From a Reflective Retreat

- Review where you came from.
- Envision where you are going.
- Reconnect with your inner strength.
- Find a bigger perspective.
- Consider new ideas.
- Calm emotions.
- Clarify thinking.
- Re-center on what matters.
- Find inner stillness.
- Listen to intuition.
- Replenish energies.
- Renew physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.
- Forgive.
- Appreciate and find gratefulness.
- Ponder the interrelationship of complex systems.
- Enjoy your many accomplishments.

- “The coaching relationship is based on trust, respect, and support.”

It’s vital to ask retreaters to articulate their coaching tenets in their words so that they can own them.

Step 2: The coaching toolbox. The facilitator explains that coaching is different from managing, mentoring, or consulting. In addition, it’s a mode of operation that managers choose to enter. What’s important for each manager to remember is that the coach doesn’t bring answers; instead, he or she carries a toolbox of powerful questions, encouragements, and challenges.

Teams explore *optimal coaching* by answering questions that help them identify the strength of a values-based and opportunity-focused approach to coaching. The key is to explore options that find the *optimal path*—the path in which organic growth is enabled in the best possible way.

Step 3: The art of listening. The facilitator explains that listening “with presence” is a whole-person effort and experience. Retreaters discuss the anatomy and body language of deep listening and practice ways to enter this zone. For example, breathing deeply from “your center” helps to put the listener in a place of no-judgment, ready to accept people the way they are. A coach has to create that zone of safety and help people accept themselves. This is the point in which change begins.

Step 4: Coaching for action. The facilitator explains the importance of moving the coaching process to action. Retreaters learn to negotiate and challenge in a way that empowers the people they are coaching to forward their intentions. Teams explore the use of language that is specific, clear, and realistic.

This step builds accountability into the coaching process. Coaches must remember that all final decisions are to be made by the person being coached.

Step 5: Creating the future. The future unfolds as a continuous flow of the present. In this step, retreaters explore how the coach can foster that unfolding process and encourage their teams to envision optimal growth and development. Discussions ensue on the phenomenon of the mind and the body as one continuum with which humans choreograph their experience of reality. Acting as a catalyst, the coach helps his or her team members reframe their perceptions of reality.

Retreaters take turns acting as the coach, the person being coached, and the observer. By alternating roles, participants experience the dynamics of coaching from all viewpoints. This activity allows retreaters to experience coaching firsthand as a form of co-inquiry and mutual reflection dedicated toward growth.

From you I have learned

Towards the end of his life, Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote “Debts and Lessons,” a chapter in his book *Meditations*, that reflected on the people he’d met throughout his life and the learning he took away from those encounters. That’s the inspiration behind this next five-step activity.

Step 1: Introduction. The facilitator introduces the idea that the people in our lives are our teachers.

Step 2: Guided Imagery. The facilitator asks retreaters to imagine that they’re in a warm, comfortable place—a place of peace. That place allows time for reflection on the value and learning of their lives’ experience.

The Two Lives and Modes of Management and Leadership

| Being Life — Qualities and Values | Doing Life — Skills |
|---|--|
| Reflection | Action |
| Long-term | Short-term |
| “What matters” | “What works” |
| The nourishment: Inspiration | The nourishment: Information |
| People feel and respond to what you are. | People see what you do. |
| Its about being authentic and enlightened in your whole person. | Its about getting effective and efficient impact in what you do. |

Step 3: Identifying your teachers. The facilitator asks participants to write down a list of up to 12 people with whom they've had significant interaction.

Step 4: Reflecting, harvesting, and journaling. Looking at the first name on their lists, participants now ask themselves the following:

- What did I see?
- What qualities did I notice?
- How were those qualities displayed?
- What learning is there for me?
- What lessons have I experienced with this person?
- What is the long-lasting value this person brought to my life?

Retreaters are asked to summarize and write down what type of lesson that interaction brought to their lives: Did they learn the quality of strength, courage, resolve, innovation, persistence, service, or compassion? Participants repeat this process for each name on their lists.

Step 5: Circle of precious learning. The facilitator introduces the idea of creating a space in which participants can share some of their newfound insights. Each participant talks of a valued lesson learned from his or her life. Other circle participants listen, allowing for a silent pause after each person speaks to honor the learning offered.

This process is designed to assist leaders in revitalizing a sense of value and gratitude in their lives and relationships. It helps participants to foster awareness and to focus on long-lasting learning. This activity offers a way for retreaters to reframe any experience as a learning opportunity.

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ROI

What's the return-on-investment on a retreat for reflection? Ask Bill Gates, who takes twice-a-year, week-long retreats

to think, read, and reflect—and he doesn't send emails. During those times, he has had some of his most important realizations and revelations, including the need to focus Microsoft on the Internet—almost missing that boat—and, later, making a shift to refocus on security and trustworthy computing.

Most people aren't disciplined enough to set aside time for reflection on their own. They don't know how to start a practice of reflection. For that reason, we're seeing the return of the facilitated leadership retreat.

I once said to a C-level executive, "If you can't take time to reflect on what matters, on what drives you, and on your vision for how your organization will redefine the marketplace and make the world a better place, you're not worthy of the allegiance and trust of your 18,000 employees and many more thousands of customers." That C-level executive agreed.

A month later, while conducting a four-day retreat for his team of vice presidents, a participant asked, "You mean we're going to 'journal' here?" He was feeling the pressure of being outside of his usual "pedal to the metal" comfort zone. Smiling, I answered, "Yes. We'll use journaling to explore leadership from the inside."

Three hours later, those same high-intensity VPs were soaking their feet in lemongrass and lavender-scented hot water, with their eyes closed, and following a guided-imagery meditation.

In the following days, our group unearthed life-centering stories, articulated what was important to our lives, and reflected on the company's culture. We examined future trends and allowed ourselves to think creatively about growth opportunities and innovations.

"I almost forgot how much we needed this kind of bonding, renewal, and clear thinking space," one VP said. "For leaders," she added, "it's all about our people and what we're able to bring in to help them unleash their potential and make it part of what we do as a company."

As consultants and coaches, we cannot do the reflection work for the leaders we facilitate, but we can be a trigger and a catalyst. We can provide a framework, a proven process, and bring to the table our own reflective passion and enthusiasm. **TD**

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How to Develop a Practice of Reflection

- Go for a walk outdoors.
- Sit quietly and listen to music.
- Keep a journal.
- Practice a sports activity or yoga.
- Meditate (variety of methods).
- Practice conversational exploration.
- Attend a facilitated retreat.