

The Ritual of Reflection

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We accomplish most of the minor activities of life through routine, habitual behaviors. You probably give little thought to how you wash your face, put on your shoes, or drive to work.

Some of these daily rituals began intentionally. For example, your parents probably worked for months (maybe years) to cause brushing your teeth to be a routine occurrence. The beginning of other rituals may be harder to identify. Still, they contribute to you making it through your day.

From studying the best organizations in the world, we know that they approach genuine excellence by routinely looking for ways to improve the products and services they deliver to their customers. This applies not only to the paying customers, but to each internal customer in the series of processes required in the organization's operations.

Achieving desired outcomes requires the execution of proper behaviors. We choose every day the most appropriate behaviors based on the circumstances we face. This sequence can be easily expressed in three simple steps: SEE – DO – GET. What we get is a function of what we do, and what we do is a function of how we see the situation and our relationship to it.

If we want to improve, it helps to consciously reflect on what we did well (so we can intentionally repeat it) and what we could do better the next time a similar situation occurs.

One of my clients is making steady progress. Several weeks ago, they held an important meeting to evaluate the way they are communicating with their suppliers. The meeting was about to end.

Before the participants could stand, one person spoke up. "Aren't we going to ask ourselves the two routine questions?" Everyone paused, put down their materials, and sat forward in their seats. One person jumped to the board and started recording responses to two questions: "What did we do well in this meeting?" and "What could we do better next time?"

The individuals in this organization are intentionally building a ritual of ending every project, activity, and meeting with a significant look at their results and the individual and collective actions that delivered them. Even the employees working on the production line are asking these questions.

In their 2003 book entitled *The Power of Full Engagement*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz write, "A positive ritual is a behavior that becomes automatic over time, fueled by some deeply held value." A sincere desire for improvement is one such deeply held value!

"We use the word 'ritual' purposefully to emphasize the notion of a carefully defined, highly structured behavior....The power of rituals is that they insure that we use as little conscious energy as possible where it is not absolutely necessary, leaving us free to strategically focus the energy available to us in creative, enriching ways....Creating positive rituals is the most powerful means we have found to effectively manage energy in the service of full engagement."

Excellence rarely develops from random acts of improvement. If you are interested in personal growth or in leading your organization toward authentic excellence, I suggest you consider asking yourself the two "reflection" questions after every engagement.

Initially, like the team I've described, you'll have to make reflection an intentional act. If two or more of you hold each other accountable for asking the questions, reflection will become a positive ritual.

You probably won't call it a "ritual of reflection." Just do it routinely, and it will become one! Your organization will continually improve, moving in the direction of genuine excellence.

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