



LIFEWORK SOLUTIONS

*Insights on maintaining balance
in both life and work from
Executive Coach Betty Till*



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Reflection: A Mirror for Successful Change

"By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."

Confucius

When you think of the concept of reflection, what comes to your mind? Many consider it to be a reactive experience—a measured look at the past in the hope of avoiding some pain or repeating some misstep in the future.

Many in health care are familiar with after-action studies, especially in places in which natural disasters and other events have caused mass-casualty incidents where lessons were learned. While these reports can provide valuable information, they are often put away on a shelf and forgotten after a while. They should be used as springboards for improvement.

Mental reflection is often defined as careful consideration after the fact, but perhaps the physical sense—of something visible bouncing off of something else and coming back to be seen by you—is closer to the type of reflection I would like to write about, because this type of reflection doesn't happen long after an event when recollections become hazy, but in the moment, when they can be seen most clearly and used most effectively.

Reflection can be an awesome tool for getting the most out of both "good" and "bad" experiences to improve your leadership effectiveness. It can also be a tool for your co-workers and subordinates that improves their effectiveness, and the way to put that tool in their hands is create a mindset, for yourself and others, of continual reflection.

Whether reflection takes place when or after things happen, learning cannot

occur without reflection. That being said, some of the most valuable reflection that leaders can do, especially in the dynamic world of health care, is "on the fly."

Sometimes when you get busy you find yourself merely reacting to events. This can be good, because you are reacting to, and taking advantage of, opportunities that are right in front of you. However, sometimes when you are in this mode, you are grabbing opportunities in the absence of reflection, without taking a big-picture look at the consequences, and in the end you may find yourself with a mixed bag.

Healthcare leaders, especially those who come from clinical backgrounds, are usually assertive, focused people. They want to make sure things are done right now and done right. They want to quickly fix things that need fixing. This often means they don't take the time to reflect on how they achieved their successes in given situations.

In health care we often meet our patient satisfaction goals for the month or some other mark. However, if we don't go back and ask the question, "What made this work?" we may be missing a great opportunity to keep the positive momentum going for the future.

Have you ever walked out of a committee meeting thinking, "Wow, that was great!" Logjams that had been in the way for months broke away, everybody was on the same page, and walking out of that meeting you had real hope that true

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momentum was building toward achieving what the committee has been striving for all this time.

STOP! Reflect before you even get all of the way out the door. Don't just revel in the moment, because the revelry won't last long. What happened? Why was the interaction so successful in there? Was it the time of day? Is today Friday or Monday or Wednesday? Was it the food? Are people just going on a shift or just coming off of one? If you were the one in charge of this meeting, were you particularly motivated on this day? What combination of factors made you show up the way you did on this day? Where were you mentally, physically and spiritually? How much did you prepare for the meeting? Was there an agenda? Were the people attending the meeting the ones who really needed to be there? Were their contributions valuable?

Depending where you look, both Peter Drucker and James Levin have been credited with this quote: "Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action." The quote acknowledges reflection's value in ensuring continuing success, rather than in just being a retrospective look at something that went wrong in order to avoid failure in similar circumstances in the future.

Going back to the example of the committee, this leader might ask, "What conditions of this committee meeting need to be duplicated in order to make the next committee meeting just as successful?"

Reflection is often lost in our technologically advanced business environment of e-mail, Blackberries and cell phones, which has created an expectation of almost hyper-responsiveness. Our connectivity is so quick that the tendency is just to take care of business and get things done now. This kind of responsiveness has been drilled into us as a customer service issue, and it can spill over into how we conduct our leadership roles as well.

In your haste to give an instantaneous response, have you ever wanted to physically grab an e-mail reply back through the wires right in the half-second after you pushed the send button? I have. Sometimes I have wished that, instead of immediately shooting back a reply, I would have spent at least a moment or two reflecting on the issue I was addressing. It might have been better to wait a few hours, or even until the next day, in order to provide a more effective response to a complex issue.

Perhaps the best way to handle situations such as these is to immediately write the person back

with something like the following: "Thanks for your suggestions about the plan. Let me digest what you have written here and I'll get back with you by the end of the day with my thoughts." In this way, you have met the expectation of a quick response to the e-mail while still giving yourself the opportunity to benefit from reflection so you can provide more effective leadership. The more you use this method, the more people will expect and accept that this is the way you work.

In my work as an executive coach, one of my most important roles has been creating a mindset of reflection for my clients. The coaching relationship causes leaders to pause outside of their daily environment and reflect on their strengths, their intentions and the impact they want to achieve.

Through hours of bouncing their reflections off of me and back to them, they begin to appreciate the value of a mindset of reflection, and they often take it with them back to their leadership positions. As one client said: "She has a way of getting me to confront the reality of what's the underlying problem...of helping me to see alternatives or paths to handle things that I never would have seen without her."

It's not about me. It's all about reflection.

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