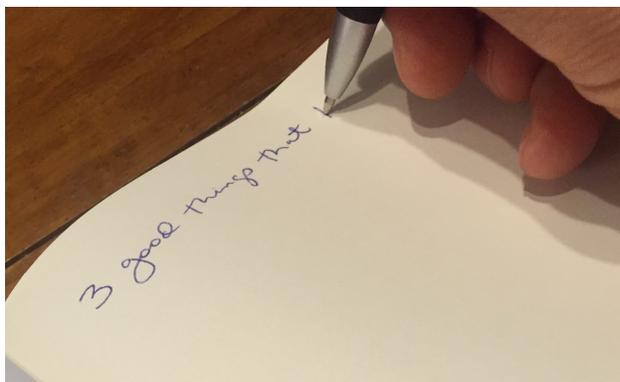


## Reflective Journaling for Leaders

Leaders develop primarily through experiences—especially by actually leading in challenging situations. But if you bounce from one experience to the next—or one crisis to the next—without taking time to reflect and make meaning of those experiences, you will fall short of your potential. See our blog post: “Leaders Develop Through Action and Reflection” <https://cornwallleadershipinstitute.com/2016/10/27/leaders-develop-through-action-and-reflection/>

Peter Drucker tells us: “Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action.”



Reflective journaling is a practice that leaders can cultivate to help them learn and make meaning from their life experiences. When we let our thoughts flow on to paper, we illuminate with greater clarity what we already know. More powerfully, however, reflective journaling creates new knowledge—new insights and meaning that did not exist before the act of reflection.

Like any valuable practice, it takes time actually doing it to develop the skills you need to reap the benefits. One simple approach is to answer these two questions, one in the morning, and one at the end of the day:

- 1. Start of the Day:** What am I curious about today?
- 2. End of the Day:** What am I learning today? (Or, What do I appreciate about today?)

Another approach, as a gateway for you into this practice, is to take the 21-day reflective journaling challenge.

**21-Day Reflective Journaling Challenge Directions:** Writing is the first part of the experience. Spend three minutes every day for 21 days practicing reflective journaling. Use the prompts (and trust that you will get a lot out of each prompt). Close your eyes, take a few really nice, deep breaths, and relax. Open your eyes, read the prompt, and start writing. Think of it like opening a gate that allows the stream of consciousness to flow onto the paper. Keep writing for three minutes. If you have nothing to write, simply write out the prompt until you have something to write. Do not let your brain get in the way of your writing. It is ok if your writing (the flow of thoughts) goes in a different direction than you expected.

After the three minutes, reflect on what you wrote. Reading and thinking about the connections, insights, and even themes can be transformative. For those who take the challenge with another person (or a team), have a conversation about your experience. Remember, it is up to you what you choose to share with another person.

## 21-Day Reflective Journaling Challenge Prompts

1. Describe three things that went well in the last week (and why).
2. When I do \_\_\_\_\_, I feel built up and energized.
3. What am I going to be curious about today?
4. What is one thing that if I started doing consistently would have a big impact over time?
5. What is one thing that if I stopped doing consistently would have a big impact over time?
6. When I was a child, I loved to do \_\_\_\_\_.
7. What gives me a sense of purpose?
8. What is one of the best meals I've ever had? And, "Why?"
9. If I could be absolutely assured of complete success doing \_\_\_\_\_, I would do it.
10. What do I most want in a subordinate/teammate? (Characteristics of people I will lead)
11. What makes me smile?
12. Refer to your response to #10. Am I being this subordinate/teammate for my leaders?
13. What makes a good neighbor?
14. What are things I can do in 15 minutes or less that improve my mood?
15. Refer to your response to #13. How will I practice being a good neighbor?
16. What am I appreciating lately?
17. What was the most important challenge of my childhood?
18. What do I most want in a leader? (i.e., characteristics of someone who leads me)
19. What is one thing I am sure of?
20. Refer to your response to #18. Am I leading my subordinates/teammates this way?
21. What will I be known for?

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You will be happily surprised at the crystallizing insights about leadership and your own self-awareness that emerge during your 21-day challenge. And, based on the research, you will also experience a positive boost to your health and overall well-being.

## Learn More About Reflective Journaling

There is a lot of great research available that speaks to the positive impact of reflective journaling. If you are interested, read Chade-Meng Tan's book, *Search Inside Yourself*. He specifically addresses reflective journaling beginning on page 95:

Journaling is the practice of self-discovery by writing to yourself. It is an important exercise to help you discover what is on your mind that is not in a clear, conscious view...You are trying to let your thoughts flow onto paper so you can see what comes up. –Chade-Meng Tan

If you are interested in the impact that reflective writing can have on workplace learning, make sure you read the *Harvard Business Review* article titled “Reflecting on Work Improves Job Performance.” <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/reflecting-on-work-improves-job-performance> According to authors Gino and Pisano, spending 15 minutes at the end of the workday in written reflection and conversation about our work can improve what we learn by 25%. Think about that—a 25% increase in effectiveness with this practice.

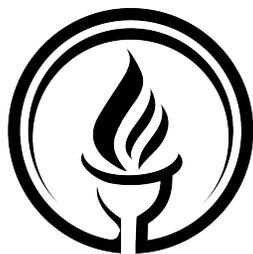
Another wonderful place to begin is Maria Popova's post on her Brain Pickings Website: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/02/18/martin-seligman-gratitude-visit-three-blessings/> Make sure you keep reading through the part with the “What-Went-Well Exercise,” also known as “Three Blessings.”

Finally, James Pennebaker at the University of Texas has made significant contributions to understanding the positive impact of reflective writing on well being across many contexts. For starters, take a look at Pennebaker's UT Webpage:

<https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/psychology/faculty/pennebaker#writing-health>

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