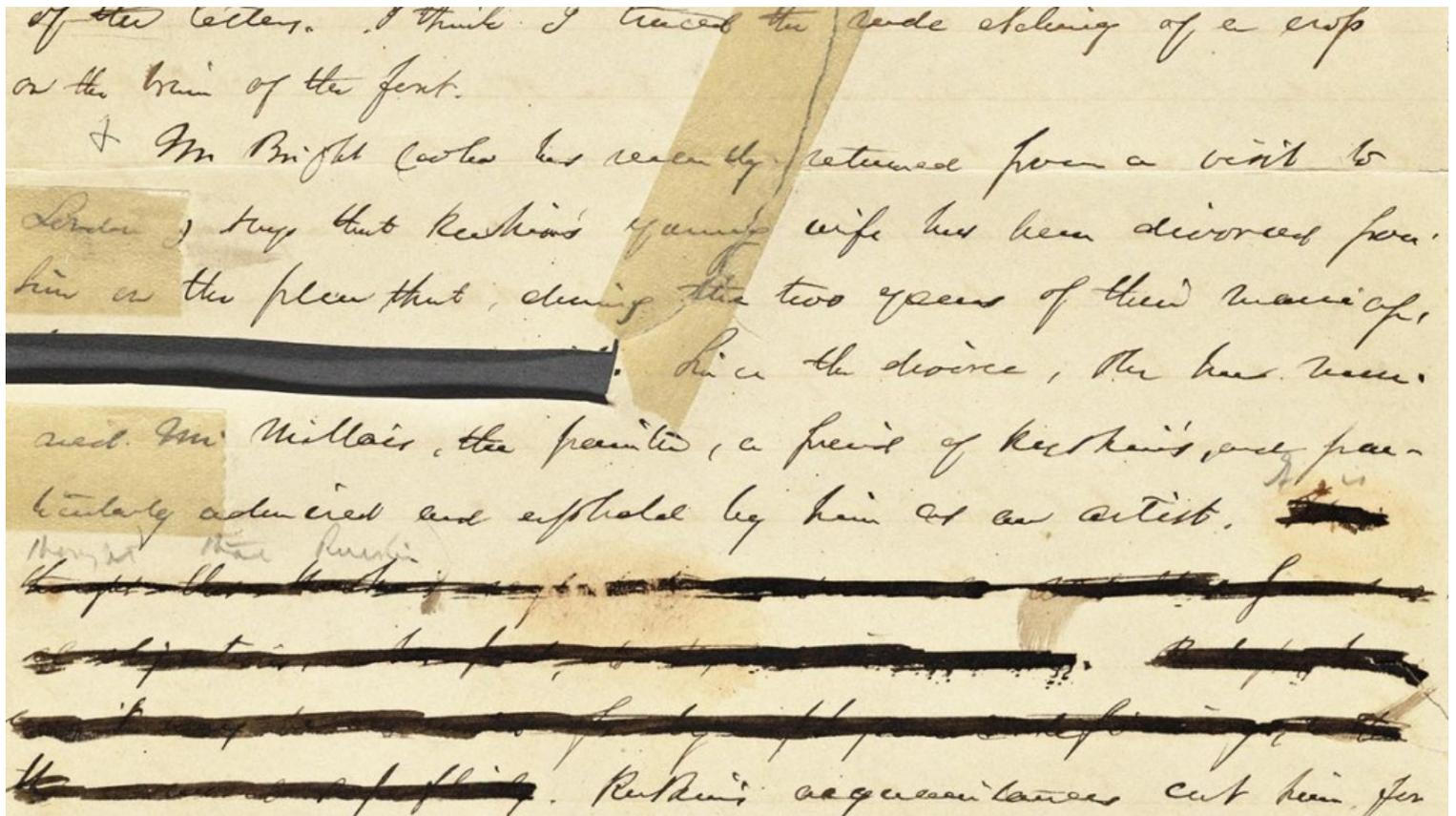


Want to Be an Outstanding Leader? Keep a Journal.

by Nancy J. Adler

JANUARY 13, 2016

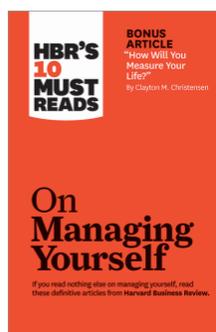


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Research has documented that outstanding leaders take time to reflect. Their success depends on the ability to access their unique perspective and bring it to their decisions and sense-making every day.

Extraordinary leadership is rooted in several capabilities: seeing before others see, understanding before others understand, and acting before others act. A leader's unique perspective is an important source of creativity and competitive advantage. But the reality is that most of us live such fast-paced, frenzied lives that we fail to leave time to actually listen to ourselves.

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Gaining access to your own insight isn't difficult; you simply need to commit to reflecting on a daily basis. Based on research (my own and others') and many years of work with global business leaders as a consultant and international management professor, I recommend the simple act of regularly writing in a journal:

1. **Buy a journal.** Writing online doesn't provide the same benefits as writing by hand. So buy a real journal. I've created *Leadership Insight*, a journal that includes blank pages, paintings, and provocative questions designed specifically for leaders – but any journal will do.
2. **Commit to reflecting** for 15 minutes a day. This is by far the most difficult step. So if 15 minutes initially seems impossible, start with three minutes. But start somewhere.
3. **Find a quiet place** where you won't be interrupted.
4. **Choose the right time**, preferably the same time each day when you won't be disturbed. Pick a time that works for you, but keep those 15 minutes carefully guarded in your agenda as an appointment with yourself.
5. **Write whatever comes to mind.** A journal's blank pages invite you to hold an honest conversation with yourself every day. In the journal, you can say anything. So give yourself permission to follow your stream of consciousness without judging, censoring, or trying to direct where your thoughts might take you. In my best reflection sessions, I feel like I am peering over my hand, just waiting to discover what I'll write next. And don't worry about grammar; however you express yourself is fine.
6. **Don't share your journal with anyone.** Your reflections are yours; they are not for anyone

else. They bring you what all the world's experts, advisers, and executive coaches combined can't offer you: your own unique perspective.

If you find yourself not knowing how to begin when you're facing the journal's blank pages, here are some suggestions:

Ask yourself a trigger question, and capture your response. These are some of my favorite questions:

- How am I feeling right now?
- How am I feeling about my leadership?
- What deserves my highest-quality attention...
 - in my leadership?
 - in my life?
 - in the world?
- What is the most outrageous (or fun or novel) idea I've heard in the last 24 hours? What do I love about it?
- What is the most exciting initiative I've heard about this week that is happening outside of my industry or in another part of the world?
- What contributed most to my happiness this week (or to the happiness of my people)? How can I have more happiness in my life?

Let art ignite your imagination. Art invites leaders to go beyond the frantic busyness of life. Viewing paintings and other forms of art offers possibilities to experiment with new perspectives. If I really focus on a painting, what do I see? If I connect what I'm seeing with my current situation, what new vantage points does the painting reveal?

This may seem far-fetched, but the unexpected juxtaposition between a painting and real-world challenges often exposes concealed dynamics and surprising new insights. Yale University, for example, discovered that young physicians became significantly better diagnosticians after taking an art history course. Why? Because looking at art teaches the viewer – whether artist, physician, or CEO – to make sense of a richer palette of complexity.

It helps us all to more accurately and creatively make sense of our world. At the same time, it instills the humility to realize that current interpretations are just one of many possible worldviews.

To use art as a reflection trigger, follow the steps below. You can try this exercise now using a painting from my most recent exhibition:



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, NANCY J. ADLER

- **Choose a painting (or other work of art).** Let your eye rest on a work of art that attracts you for any reason whatsoever (because you love it, you hate it, or for a reason that is unknown to you).
- **Observe the painting uninterrupted for at least three minutes.** Time yourself! Three minutes may feel like a very long time.

- **Strengthen your ability to see.** Describe the painting: What did you see? How did it seem to change as you viewed it? What were you able to see at the end of the three minutes that you didn't notice when you first chose the painting?
- **Ask bridging questions.** What new perspectives does the painting reveal? For example: How is the current situation in the economy (or in my company or team) like this painting? How does the painting's complexity reflect the hidden complexity in our recent tri-continental merger? In what ways does the painting reveal opportunities we are missing in transitional economies? Let yourself be surprised by the insights that emerge.

Connect to purpose. All too many leaders have a surfeit of opportunities but suffer a paucity of meaning. Asking questions that bring us back to what is most meaningful to us personally, as well as to what we believe is most important for society and the planet, deepens our sense of purpose. For example, you might ask: *What is my daily work? What is my life's work?* Similarly, reflecting in your journal on inspirational words from world leaders or wisdom traditions can act as an antidote to superficiality and parochialism. Here are two of my favorites:

“Listen. The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside without fear.”

–Dag Hammarskjöld

Economist and Secretary-General of the United Nations, 1953-1961

“We have a responsibility in our time, as others have had in theirs, not to be prisoners of history but to shape history.”

–Madeleine Albright

U.S. Secretary of State, 1997-2001

Such insights remind us that our leadership needs to be significant, not merely successful – that strategy and tactics remain meaningless without ultimate purpose.

No matter what question you start with, let your reflection take you on a journey where you are the passenger, not the conductor. Using a journal regularly will give you the courage to see the world differently, to understand the world differently, and to lead in new and needed ways.

Nancy J. Adler is the S. Bronfman Chair in Management at McGill University. She conducts research and consults worldwide on global leadership, cross-cultural management, and arts-inspired leadership practices. She has authored more than 125 articles, produced 3 films, and published 10 books and edited volumes. Nancy is also a visual artist and has been an artist-in-residence at The Banff Centre. Her paintings are held in private collections around the world.

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Bharath Gopalan 2 days ago

Being one who has been journaling for the last couple of years, though not regularly, I would say with a deep conviction that journaling is vital not only for becoming a better leader, but for 'living a legacy' which ultimately leads to 'leaving a legacy'. When we look back at the end of the day, it is the emotions that we are left with that tell us how we lived our day. If I don't feel a sense of fulfillment, then there is certainly something that needs to be improved upon - this gives me a key information about me that needs to be changed.

I must thank my friend Dr Andrew Thorn, who taught me the 'Daily Question' process: Thinking up those vital questions - those that mattered the most to you - that you would like to ask yourself that give you a sense of significance and fulfillment; Dr Thorn suggests that even engaging in this process of thinking could help in discovering one's values and improving focus. He has dwelt on this elaborately in his book *Leading With Your Legacy in Mind*.

Journaling for me has been more about answering my daily questions as to how the day has contributed to my inner growth and how today is going to help my tomorrow. And I must share that the experience has been leading to inner calm and peace.

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