

FOOD FOR THE MIND 3 - THE REFLECTIVE MINDSET

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The Reflective Mind-Set

“Managers who are sent off to development courses these days often find themselves being welcomed to “boot camp.” This is no country club, they are warned; you’ll have to work hard. But this is wrongheaded. While managers certainly don’t need a country club atmosphere for development, neither do they need boot camp. Most managers we know already live boot camp every day. Besides, in real boot camps, soldiers learn to march and obey, not to stop and think. These days, what managers desperately need *is* to stop and think, to step back and reflect thoughtfully on their experiences. Indeed, in his book *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky makes the interesting point that events, or “happenings,” become experience only after they have been reflected upon thoughtfully: “Most people do not accumulate a body of experience. Most people go through life undergoing a series of happenings, which pass through their systems undigested. Happenings become experiences when they are digested, when they are reflected on, related to general patterns, and synthesized.”

Unless the meaning is understood, managing is mindless. Hence we take reflection to be that space suspended between experience and explanation, where the mind makes the connections. Imagine yourself in a meeting when someone suddenly erupts with a personal rant. You’re tempted to ignore or dismiss the outburst—you’ve heard, after all, that the person is having problems at home. But why not use it to reflect on your own reaction—whether embarrassment, anger, or frustration—and so recognize some comparable feelings in yourself? Your own reaction now becomes a learning experience for you: You have opened a space for imagination, between your experience and your explanation. It can make all the difference.

Organizations may not need “mirror people,” who see in everything only reflections of their own behavior. But neither do they need “window people,” who cannot see beyond the images in front of them. They need managers who see both ways—in a sense, ones who look out the window at dawn, to see through their own reflections to the awakening world outside. “Reflect” in Latin means to refold, which suggests that attention turns inward so that it can be turned outward. This means going beyond introspection. It means looking in so that you can better see out in order to perceive a familiar thing in a different way—a product as a service, maybe, or a customer as a partner. Does that not describe the thinking of the really successful managers, the Andy Groves of the world? Compare such people with the Messiers and Lays, who dazzle with great mergers and grand strategies before burning out their companies.

Likewise, reflective managers are able to see behind in order to look ahead. Successful “visions” are not immaculately conceived; they are painted, stroke by stroke, out of the experiences of the past. Reflective managers, in other words, have a healthy respect for history—not just the grand history of deals and disasters but also the everyday history of all the little actions that make organizations work. Consider in this regard Kofi Annan’s deep personal understanding of the United Nations, a comprehension that has been the source of his ability to help move that complex body to a different and better place. You must appreciate the past if you wish to use the present to get to a better future.”