LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

REFLECTION AND RENEWAL FOR 2016
PAGES 6–7
TO REFLECT AND RENEW

WITH the New Year come new expectations. Some of us form resolutions, while others say doing that is too mainstream, and prefer to "go with the flow"—opting for spontaneity in the process. Whichever school of thought we belong to, the year ahead will be one of possibilities and an immense number of opportunities.

Hence, my favourite tagline carpe diem, which means seize the day. No matter what comes our way, we can choose to be optimistic and try to make the most out of life. It is not merely a state of mind, but a daily, deliberate choice.

In this week’s centre spread story, Roshan Thiran shares with us the importance of having a reflection and renewal process, as he reflects on the past 12 months, and advises us to launch into the next year with renewed zest and vigour. Some of the key takeaways include scheduling daily reflection breaks, be willing to change, and destroy old habits.

We also bring you the weekly Try This column—Freda Liu shares a four-step reflective process beginning with gratefulness, lessons, achievements, and concluding with the question: "What's next?"

In the following & A Leader column, Joseph builds on the momentum by asking a simple yet profound question: "Should I even bother celebrating the New Year?" He shares with us three thought-provoking perspectives, but it is the conclusion that really captures the imagination. Read on to find out what he has to say.

Top 10 looks at a number of ways to ensure high quality work, and do look out for the final paragraph where it lists three crucial ingredients for success.

In Thought Of The Week, James draws a number of crucial leadership lessons from the art of swing dancing. One that caught my eye is the notion that "the leader needs to be fluid—which is a really good reminder in a business world that is obsessed with rigid business plans and immovable stakeholders."

Simon Sinek, in this week’s Hard Talk looks at purpose, and prefers to "go with the flow"—opting for spontaneity in the year into the silent storm. At the top of the mountain unless you've been to the valley. At the top of the mountain unless you've been there.

Carpe diem,
IAN LEE
Editor
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WHY SHOULD I BEGIN AGAIN?

By JOSEPH TAN
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S

ould I even bother myself with celebrating the New Year? After the party is over and the resolution statements are craft-ed, I usually find myself exactly where I ended the year before – nothing really much has changed and I am back where I was the year before.

The New Year then is only a definition of time and not a measure of transform-ation. What is all this hype about new beginnings when I have not even over-come old baggages?

If measurement drives behaviour, then it follows that the unit of measure-ment will determine the intensity of my drive to change. As long as I view the period as a new “year”, I will be focusing on generalities with no specific focus for progress.

However, if I look at the New Year as a period of new “time”, then it re-orien-tates my perspective in such a way that change is possible. Perhaps, there can be a new beginning, after all.

PERSPECTIVE 1: ACCOUNTABILITY

The object of a New Year is not that we should have a new year. It is that we should have a new soul and a new nose; new feet, a new backbone, new ears, and new eyes.” — G.K. Chesterton

where your actions and how you spend your time will have a significant impact on what matters – not only to you but also to the organisation as well. Now, as you think about the New Year, think in terms of what aim you are entrusted with. The stronger this sense of “entrustment”, the higher the likelihood of the New Year having a great begin-n ing.

Here are three “trust perspective” questions for your reflection: ● Is my job merely a series of tasks to be completed, rather than a purposeful assignment? ● Do I have the mind-set of serving others because I do not want to let them down? ● Do I see my time as a given trust by which, what I do will significantly impact those around me?

PERSPECTIVE 2: PROJECT MANAGEMENT

As you look back at the many years that have passed, what brings a smile, what is it that causes you to savour the joy of living? The meaningful conversa-tions, the fun vacations, the special cele-brations, the walk in the park – all these represent intentional time investments which resulted in the reaping of its fruits.

The law of sowing and reaping is the fundamental premise for this perspective of time. Without an intentional invest-ment of scheduled and planned time, none of these memories would be pos-sible.

So, as you peer into the New Year, have the same attitude as that of a wise funds manager – how shall I best invest the limited resources available for the maximum possible returns? With the 365 resource-days which you have available, what sort of investment plan do you have and what returns do you desire to have when you finally reach Dec 31, 2016?

It is not about how you have spent the New Year, rather it is about how you will be sowing into the New Year for results that can be reaped for many more years to come.

Here are three “investment perspective” questions for your evaluation: ● Begin with the end in mind – What type of “fruits” do I want to see in my life by Dec 31, 2016? This will set the tone for my investment activities for the year ahead. ● With the limited resources which I have, what is it that I need to stop doing? ● With the limited resources which I have, what is it that I need to do differ-ently?

PERSPECTIVE 3: TIME IS A TREASURE

Life is the accumulation of memorable moments. As you look back at the many years where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. How 2016 will turn out for you depends on your “treasure” decisions i.e. what I decide in my mind will then direct my heart.

Here are three “treasure perspective” questions for your evaluation: ● List down what really matters. For example, it is not just about wealth but what do you plan to do with your wealth. It is not about health but what you want to do with your state of well-being. ● List down what really matters. It is a paradox that often, those closest to us are those we take for granted – we do not realise the value of certain relation-ships until they are taken away from us. ● List down work that matters. Instead of being constrained by your job descrip-tion, have you ever thought of growing in your area of talents – how are you naturally inclined to think, act and feel? Ever thought about exploring an expanded job area that leverages on what really motivates you? Remember, no one can read your mind until you speak it.

THE PRIVILEGE OF CREATION

Why should I begin? As a self-aware being, I have the privilege of being a part of the creation process – in fact, all things are created twice – first in the mind, then it is expressed through my outward actions. I begin with a dream and then I execute with a plan.

Why should I begin? As a responsible leader, I have the privilege of creating a better future and environment for those under my care – both in the workplace and also at home. If for reasons of laziness and apathy, I do not embrace the creative possibilities of the New Year, then I have just entered into the New Year with an old mind-set. There is too much at stake for me not to begin.
DRA WING A BLANK?

LET US HELP YOUR BUSINESS GROW IN 2016.
I.T’s the start of a new year with yet another chance to chart your career and ensure that top quality work is produced in your organisation. They say talent breeds innovation and innovation creates success. But when it’s time to deliver that project to the board, what can be done as an employer to ensure your talent maximise their contribution?

It’s all well and good for individuals to devise ingenious strategies for growth, but if these strategies are not executed with a degree of precision, is your company producing the standard of work it requires?

Here are 10 ways for creating a disciplined, cohesive approach to high quality work.

1 PLANTING THE SEED FOR SUCCESS
Every project must start with a concise objective and a clear vision for progression. What is it that you are trying to achieve? Who is your target audience? What message do you want to convey and how are you going to communicate that message? These questions provide the necessary structure for developing your project brief and help establish the steps needed to reach your goal.

2 WHY, WHY, WHY?
An understanding of why you are creating this piece of work is essential in controlling the direction of the project. A project that loses sight of the original purpose will not achieve the required result. It will also affect the consistency of the messages being conveyed.

Developing your own motivations is also critical to the outcome of the project. Are you in it for the money? Do you want to further your career ambitions? Or do you want the company to succeed? This will ultimately affect your drive and quality of work.

3 BE A KNOW-IT-ALL
The best way to streamline your key messaging is through qualitative and quantitative research. A thorough understanding of the topic at hand and the audience you are targeting is crucial. You need to be able to pre-empt how people think and how they will react to your work. Monitoring behaviours, quirks and numerical targets will help you self-regulate the project.

4 BACK YOURSELF ALL THE WAY
Now that your blueprint for success is complete, you need to have the confidence to support your actions. Have faith in the project you have devised. There’s a reason why you spent all that time researching and devising a strategy.

Have faith in your own talent and the talent of your team. If you start losing confidence in your own ability, you’ll start doubting your actions and decisions. Accountability is key, so never back down or pass the blame to someone else. The buck stops at you.

5 YOU’RE NOT ALONE
Large projects can often be overwhelming and as such being able to delegate tasks and work closely with colleagues is essential. Creating unnecessary stress by burdening yourself with most of the work is counterproductive.

Utilise the resources at your disposal and seek guidance from superiors and different departments. This will not only increase quality control but will maintain the talent’s passion and motivation for the project.

6 MANAGE YOUR WORKLOAD
Be smart with your time and estimate how long it will take to complete each assignment. Work late if you must, but also consider working in advance so as to avoid deadlines.

Quality is everything, so don’t be afraid to stimulate yourself with extrinsic motivation. Have a coffee, take a break, and change your work hours.

Being patient is key. If you force yourself you are likely to make a mistake. The “one-percenters” can make or break the project, so stay fresh and pay attention to detail.

7 THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY
Embrace change and learn how to maximise your output by becoming familiar with new technology and its many influences.

Effective use of e-resources, hardware and social media can allow for greater efficiency. Devices such as smart phones, laptops and tablets are multi-functional and can reduce costs and response time.

8 IS THIS WHAT I WANT?
As you near the end of the project, consider implementing editorial strategies to analyse and regulate your work. Ask yourself: Have I answered the question? Does the work make sense? Can I make improvements?

Feedback from superiors is also important. Confer with a colleague and ask them for their opinion. Get them to approve the tone and language of the work. Two pair of eyes are better than one.

9 DOES IT LOOK A MILLION DOLLARS?
Presentation is everything. An audience needs to be able to view the piece of work and process its message within seconds. The three-second glance rule has changed how we present information.

If your project is not engaging then the importance of the content will be lost. The secret is to keep things simple. Is the colour consistent? Is the format consistent? Is the font readable? Cutting costs on presentation will detract from the original purpose of the project.

10 DOT YOU ‘I’S AND CROSS YOUR ‘T’S
It’s true, the small things in life matter. Personal touches and simple grammar can make or break a project. Proofreading is everything. Is your spelling and punctuation correct? Have you used the correct words? Do you know the difference between “there”, “their” and “they’re”? It’s really that bad!

And it gets even worse. Have you saved your changes and updated the relevant sections on the website? Have you copied in the appropriate people on an email? Have you spelt their name correctly?

CONCLUSION
Whatever your project may be, accuracy is essential. Any hint of unprofessionalism will undermine all efforts to breed innovation. Success truly lies in hard work, dedication and a will to be perfect.
The practice of reflection goes back centuries and is rooted in numerous religious institutions including the Japanese samurai, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described as a form of solitude and reflection. This was a fundamental part of their life. They developed a list of 13 virtues and each day they would reflect on these virtues. This reflection practice enabled them to become a “renaisance man” who was cultured, an artist, writer and a great leader.

As humans, one of the most fascinating things about us is our power to change, yet we just live the outside but the inside. We can change our beliefs, fears, perceptions and even our habits. In fact, all animals shed their skin — even you! For most of us, this is a continuous process which we rarely notice. Scientists term this process “ecdysis.” Why do the snakes shed their skin? In order to allow for the new skin that may have attached to their old skin. As humans, we may have attached to our old skin habits and beliefs that may have stuck in our bed, not able to move.

The Renewal Process

By Roshan Thiran

The Renewal Process

One of the highlights of planning organizations is the fact that smaller, more nimble and agile competitors pop up and destroy long established business models and truly bold businesses. CEOs who have changed transport systems and Andrei has charged his industry.

Why do organizations that have deep expertise and experience in their industry get turned over by smaller organizations that may have attached to their old skin habits and beliefs that may have stuck in our bed, not able to move.

A) Am I clear about who I am and what my purpose is? B) Why am I here at this moment? Is what I am doing aligned with my bigger vision? C) When I look in the mirror, what do I see? D) How will I get there? Is doing what I am currently doing going to enable me to get there? E) What goes through my mind? F) What's stopping me from moving forward? G) What are the obstacles I may need to overcome? H) What changes about myself to enable me to get to where I want to go?

WHAT'S YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL RENEWAL PROCESS?

One of the hallmarks of planning organisations is the fact that smaller, more nimble and agile competitors pop up and destroy long established business models and truly bold businesses. CEOs who have changed transport systems and Andrei has charged his industry.

WHAT'S THIS MEAN FOR ME?

It is a critical for organisations, even while at the top and entrenched in their processes. But this same process is applicable to all of us individuals. Edwin Kafka is a classic example of a giant losing its way due to its lack of internal reflection and renewal process. If your organisation is not consistently reflecting, and making constant changes to its processes and structures, business models, culture and its leadership DNA, you could soon join Kafka.

It is amazing how closed organisations tend to get and how they tend to not make changes. Even in our personal lives, we are similarly change-adverse. Be the opposite. When you do throw yourself to accumulate life experiences, you will suddenly learn how little you know about the world and the things you take for granted.

Renewal and rejuvenation were the keys to survival of a giant losing its way due to its lack of internal reflection and renewal process. If your organisation is not consistently reflecting, and making constant changes to its processes and structures, business models, culture and its leadership DNA, you could soon join Kafka.

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It is a critical for organisations, even while at the top and entrenched in their processes. But this same process is applicable to all of us individuals.
I love dancing. I’ve always been involved in dance performances, choreographs and competitions as I was growing up. If I had been born in America, I’d probably have ended up as a dancer for Michael Jackson.

Swing dance was something I was exposed to seven years ago, but didn’t follow up until 2014 when I realised that the girl I used to dance with was doing it twice a week in Singapore. After seeing her on the dance floor, I was determined to be good at it so I could ask her for a dance. So what has swing dance got to do with leadership?

**THE LEAD AND THE FOLLOW**

Any type of partner for dance will have assigned roles: the Lead and the Follow. The Leads, which are traditionally the guys, will decide what moves to perform and the Follows, who are traditionally women, will read the signals given by the Leads and execute the moves.

Life itself is very much like dancing. You often find yourself in the deep end learning how to lead or follow. First-time Leads will scramble with the little vocabulary of dance moves trying to lead, and first-time Follows will find it hard to read what the Leads want them to do. Whether you dance or don’t, here are five leadership lessons to take away from the dance floor and apply it to the rest of your life.

**1. BE FLUID**

You should know by now that things in life don’t always go the way you want them to. In swing dance, if you’re a Lead, this can take the form of doing a move you thought would work and it doesn’t. It could be your mistake or perhaps your dance partner is new to the move, hence it didn’t work.

A good Lead will always improvise. They will go with the flow, adjust, and turn that blunder into something beautiful.

In real life, maybe you have a business plan that didn’t work out the way you wanted it, or it could be just a party you’re trying to throw and it fell through. How can you be fluid enough to adapt and turn it to your advantage?

“Life is like dancing. If we have a big floor, many people will dance. Some will get angry when the rhythm changes. But life is changing all the time.” – Don Miguel Ruiz

**2. RESPECT AND TEACH**

Be nice and respect your partner. The relationship you have while dancing to that three-minute song shows a lot about you. No-one likes a dancing partner who makes you feel awkward. People naturally gravitate towards you when you make them feel comfortable. A great dancer can still be deemed a jerk if you’re being aggressive or even trying too hard on a move that results in hurting your partner. Others might make their partners feel uncomfortable because they throw moves way above their level, which creates a huge gap. Instead, break down the moves a little. Likewise, as leaders in your sphere, always respect your people. Give them challenges gradually and patiently guide them through tough times to develop them.

Your people will then see that you have their best interests at heart, and will try to follow up by bit by bit. Eventually, a huge task given to them won’t seem so daunting after all.

**3. CLEAR COMMUNICATION**

A message is only effective when it is delivered with clarity that the audience understands it. In swing dance, communication is important. There are times that I myself as a Lead tried a move that isn’t communicated clearly and the Follow moved in an unexpected way.

Our bodies give out the best communication. People may not consciously pay attention to your body, but they still “hear” what it says. Good Leads make sure their body is saying what they want to say.

In life, when you communicate with confidence, your people can follow your leading more clearly. And if you don’t, they may pick up that insecurity and stumble on their feet along the way.

“Opportunities don’t come by all the time. If you take too long of a time to decide on something, you’d most likely miss the boat.”

**4. TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY**

Opportunities don’t come by all the time. If you take too long of a time to decide on something, you’d most likely miss the boat.

On the dance floor, you may see someone across the room that you want to dance with. Maybe you’re the confident type and you go for it right away. On the other spectrum, you may be someone who takes the whole night just thinking about it.

There isn’t always going to be the next song. Seize the moment, and don’t wait too long. If you do miss the opportunity, most likely it was not yours to begin with.

Take your time and look for these golden opportunities that may help you progress in your career goals and life’s purposes.

“Opportunity dances with those already on the dance floor.” – H. Jackson Brown, Jr
I felt sick. I wanted to curl up in a ball and be alone. I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I was ashamed.

To most people, what I did would seem a trifle, but to me it was much deeper. I gave a talk to an organisation that violated the very core of my beliefs. In my mind, I felt like a sell-out.

In my pre-engagement calls, I had a bad feeling about this group. They treated me like some vendor. I could barely get a question in as they were talking so much. They also sent an email telling me what to wear – dress pants and a jacket. Had they done no research on me? I always wear jeans. But I talked myself out of it. “Stop acting like a diva,” I told myself. I sat back stage waiting for my time to speak, listening to the executives give their talks to the group. They presented themselves as a company that sells financial advice, but in my opinion, they weren’t doing it in an honourable way. It seemed to me to be more like a pyramid scheme; a multilevel marketing organisation that makes money on recruiting new financial planners and having them use their “system” to win clients.

All they did was talk about money and who were the high performers. Never once did they talk about helping clients – the people they are supposed to serve.

I believe in helping people and doing right by others. This company preyed on people’s ambitions. They weren’t interested in helping people, rather they were interested in exploiting them and profiting off their risk. I felt sick. I didn’t want to be there and I didn’t want to be a part of it.

STICKING TO YOUR VALUES

I made my choice. There was something I had that they didn’t: the microphone. They were going to put me on the stage, turn on a spotlight and let me speak, uninterrupted for 60 minutes. I would use that time to share my message. To preach. And preach I did. I spoke of the power of trust. I spoke of giving to others as the most selfish thing any person could do, because the more we look out for others, the more others will look out for us. I chastised systems that manipulate (and I stared right at the senior executives when I did). I told stories I had heard from my time with the military – stories of heroism and sacrifice. I said: “They give medals to people who are willing to sacrifice themselves so that others may gain.”

“In business, we give bonuses to those who are willing to sacrifice others so that we may gain. We’ve got it backwards,” I implored.

They clapped at the end, but I didn’t stick around. I walked off the stage, grabbed my stuff and walked straight out the back door. I didn’t talk to anyone and I didn’t want anyone to talk to me. I felt sick and ashamed that I was a part of this.

RATIONALISATION VS PURPOSE

I joined the daily huddle call our little company has where we share what we’re up to for the day and ask for help if we need it. I didn’t follow the normal procedure. Instead, I confessed. I told them how I felt.

My team was amazing. “Don’t sweat it,” they said trying to make me feel better. “We’re sure your message resonated and you converted a few.” One by one they took turns trying to help me see something good that may have come from this experience. But purpose cannot be rationalised.

I remember when I worked in the advertising industry and I asked one of the executives what societal good advertising does?

“We help drive the economy,” was his response. So did the manufacturers of gas chambers during the Holocaust. Finding elements of good does not equal a noble purpose. It’s just rationalising.

Providing jobs, driving the economy and serving shareholders are not purposes. They are rationalisations used when a greater cause or purpose is not clear or not there. Real purpose has a clear and definitive direction. It is a path that points towards a very specific vision of the future. Rationalisations have no destination, they are simply a calculation to demonstrate some benefit to justify the actions. Rationalisations are just that: rational.

In contrast, purpose is deeply emotional. This is why we feel passion and intense drive when we are involved with something that has purpose. And it’s why we get that sick feeling when we do something in violation of that purpose. There is no sick feeling from violating a rationalised purpose… nor is there and invigorating passion to pursue it.

Because a true sense of purpose is deeply emotional, it serves as a compass to guide us to act in a way that is completely consistent with our values and beliefs. Purpose does not need to involve calculations or numbers. Purpose is about the quality of life.

PURPOSE CANNOT BE RATIONALISED

Purpose is human, not economic.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I thanked my team for their support, but insisted that we could not and should not try to rationalise making these kinds of errors. They are mistakes and we should learn from them to avoid finding ourselves in the same position again in the future. We should feel ashamed when they happen and we should also hold each other accountable and support each other to avoid decisions that would leave us in a position where we are forced to compromise on what we stand for.

We’ve already implemented new checks and balances to avoid the same situation from happening again.

The company I spoke for had signed a contract for me to speak at another one of their events later this year. The problem for them is, I won’t be there. There is no contract on the planet that can force me to violate what I stand for. I will lose money and I will certainly ruffle some feathers… and that’s fine by me. They will all get over it in due course. They will rationalise why I was the wrong person for the job anyway. But I could never feel whole for showing up, no matter how much money they offered.

Money is a calculation. My values are who I am.
**THE FORGE OF LIFE**

**By STEVE PAVLINA**
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Sometimes I like thinking of life as a forge that moulds us and gives us shape and substance as we live. We come into this world like blocks of marble, and we’re sculpted by experience.

We can let the forge do its job on its own. But we also have the option to consciously participate in the process if we feel ready for that. We can collaborate with the forge in order to have a say in what we’re becoming.

Sometime ago, I attended a workshop by author/speaker Tim Freke. Tim shared an idea that resonated with me. First he noted the conception that when we die, some people imagine that we’ll see a bright light, and supposedly we’re expected to go towards the light and dissolve into it. When this happens, we shed our earthly identities. We experience total oneness. But we also essentially become unconscious. If dissolving into the light means shedding your individual consciousness, then there’s no ego left through which consciousness can look at itself. Consequently, going into the light actually means going dark.

Tim suggested an alternative. He asked (I’m paraphrasing here), “What if instead of dissolving into the light, the point of life is to develop such a strong individual consciousness that we don’t want to dissolve into unconscious oneness afterwards?” That’s an interesting perspective, isn’t it? What if the spiritual goal of your earthly life is to develop such a strong consciousness, identity, and personality that you’d love to continue going even after you die? So, you look at the offer to dissolve into the light and you exclaim, “No thanks! I’ll keep going with what I’ve created!”

If a master swordmaker created an amazingly beautiful and elegant sword, would you acknowledge its greatness and then toss it back into the forge right away to recycle it? Or would you display it proudly? Study it more deeply? Admire its craftsmanship?

Would you enjoy using such a sword? Once the sword is crafted, wouldn’t it be nice to learn how to wield it? You could spend a whole other lifetime exploring and mastering the use of that sword, long after the forging is done.

Life is forging, sculpting, and moulding you. Sometimes it shapes you with fire. Sometimes it shapes you with water. And sometimes it lets you rest.

**FORGING THE SELF**

When you see that you’re being forged by experience, you gain the option to consciously participate in your own forging. You can help direct the forge, telling him how to mould and shape you in ways that you desire. The forger may have his own plan for you, and you can submit to that plan, align with it and help enhance it, or you can break from it. How do you do this?

**Surrender**

Recognise the ways that life has already been shaping you, and instead of resisting those movements, actively invite and encourage them. Notice where life keeps nudging you to go, and go there.

**Exploration**

Lean into new experiences. One of my favourite expressions is: Embrace the new. I’ve found that when I do this, I have fewer regrets. If the outcome is positive, then I’ve moulded my character in some valuable new way. If the outcome isn’t so good, then I’ve learned a good lesson about how to mould my character, and I’ve freed my mind to let go of the recurring “maybe I should try this” thought pattern. It’s much easier to keep progressing when I satisfy my curiosity through direct experience.

**Confront Your Fears**

What do you fear? Public speaking? Talking to strangers? Being homeless? Falling in business? Being rejected? Intimacy? Confront your fears again and again, and your fear dissolves. This gives you more power to participate in sculpting your own character since now you can embrace new types of forging that you’d otherwise resist due to irrational fears. You gain new lists of properties that you could forge into your character, properties that were previously unavailable to you. For instance, you could create a character who travels around the world doing public speaking, which wouldn’t have been accessible when you resisted flying, speaking, and travelling abroad.

**Conscious Modification of the Forge Itself**

You can deliberately change your environment and your social connections to help influence how you turn out. Move to a new city or part of a town. Drop unsupportive social connections, and invite and add more inspiring ones. If you don’t like what some of the forgers in your life are doing, stop inviting them into your forge.

**Conscious Character Design**

What kind of character would you like to create? Who do you dream of becoming?

Take some time to review a list of values, these of which can be found in my article, List of Values, on my website. Note the ones that you’d most like to include in your character.

**How to?**

You can let the forge make all of these decisions for you, or you can actively participate in the process, which gives you the ability to significantly enhance, customise, and polish your character.

Have you already created such a delightful character that you’d love to keep living and exploring with your creation as it is right now? Could you decline the invitation to dissolve into the light? If not, then what’s missing? What additional forging remains to be done? What’s the next step for you? What action could you take right now to help forge your character in the direction of your desires? Take that action.
The Heart and Art of Employee Engagement

Are Employees Engaged, Estranged or Entertained?

They copied the practice, but missed the principle. The practice can be good, but you need to get the underlying dynamics right. First, these dynamics are what drive change or results.

Heart Over Head

Coming back to the earlier story, it was not the sweet treats that built a high-performance team but the spirit of the activity. Love, sharing, authenticity and trust make all the difference.

Recent writings on the topic of employee engagement point out that there are so many ideas to do this, and to do that. People think: “Just because it worked in another company – it should work here!”

What we need to understand is that it is not the practice that makes the difference but the dynamics (the heartfelt intent and spirit) in which a particular act is done.

These principles lie at the heart of employee engagement:
- Involvement
- Commitment
- Empowerment
- Ownership

Endearing Engagement Companies

The authors of the book “Firms of Endearment: How World-Class Companies Profited from Passion and Purpose” distilled out the companies today that are the ultimate value engagers and creators. Some of these companies include IDEO and IKEA, Commerce Bank, Amazon, Costco, SAS Institute, Google, Timberland, Southwest, New Balance, etc.

These companies generate emotional, experiential, social, financial value as part of their internal culture.

People love doing business with these firms of endearment. “Loyalty” is real and visible and helps to create unbeatable advantages for organisations which are founded on the right principles, values and culture.

People are increasingly searching for higher meaning and purpose in their lives. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that organisations which are driven with purpose and passion from the inside have the highest levels of employee engagement.

The 3 T’s of Successful Engagement

The three pivotal organisational engagement principles are: Truthfulness, Trust and Thrust.

Engagements that lead to good and sustainable partnerships must first be founded on Truthfulness.

Organisations that engage in truthfulness are basically those that are able to provide an environment where people feel safe without the need to look behind their backs all the time. Only when people stop worrying about themselves can they look out for each other.

If an employee’s No.1 key result area is to watch their backs — there won’t be much time left to engage and flow with creativity, capability and the passion of working.

Truthfulness leads to Trust, which is made possible through acts of openness, sharing, creativity, collaboration, experimentation and value creation.

The third important principle is Thrust. Thrust here means a forward thrust — the desire to achieve something.

Man by his very nature lives on hope. And hope for something greater and better is what empowers him to create value. It is the feeling that you are part of something bigger.

This mindset provides the thrust for inspiration, involvement, initiative, improvement and innovation.

When these three T’s work synergistically — power is expressed in every facet of the organisation by using resources through relationships to create results.

Through this, the desires, energies and the talents of the organisation can be fully tapped to deliver the ultimate customer, user and employee experience for an endearing and enduring company.
f a few years ago, I worked for a stretch alongside someone I’ll call Louis (not his real name). By all appearances, Louis looked like a world-beater on a path to the top.

He was smart and had an outstanding work ethic. His undergraduate and graduate degrees were from top programmes, and his resume had big-name company experience to add to his pedigree. More than once, I even heard other people refer to him as “the hardest-working man in the industry.”

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**BUT BENEATH THE SURFACE...**

It seemed crazy. Louis really was one of the most prolific workers I’ve ever seen. I would have a brainstorming conversation with him at 6pm, and by 8am the next day, he would already have a 15-slide presentation outlining his ideas based on the conversation. I can’t think of anyone else whom I’ve ever worked with who loved assignments that much.

Louis had a habit of fixating on a solution rooted in business theory and then either ignoring or severely underestimating the human aspects that would allow it to work.

When you advocate a provocative solution that requires people to make big changes in their worldview or behaviour, you need to be a master of driving adoption of your ideas. It requires anticipating and guiding people’s emotional reactions more so than applying force of reason to win an argument.

But rather than engage in the subtler aspects of persuasion, Louis instead vig-orously defended his ideas based on their theoretical merit and dismissed practical concerns, which he regarded as trivial. It often made working with Louis exhausting and frustrating.

I came away with the impression that his demeanour hampered his career progression, which is a shame for someone of his raw intelligence.

In a way, Louis is a high performer who didn’t get enough coaching on how to transition from the apprenticeship phase to the leadership phase.

Anyone who goes through an intense apprenticeship phase is at some risk of this happening to them too. Entry-level workers, consultants, bankers, software developers, marketeers, and professionals in countless other categories usually begin their careers by working insanely hard on tasks assigned by their managers, with only a small portion of their work being self-directed. This layer of smart, young apprentice talent is foundational to how most large organisations get work done.

Worker bees at the bottom stay heads-down accomplishing tasks. Middle managers make sure the tasks fit into cohesive projects. Senior managers make sure all the projects come together to accomplish a business plan.

As a worker bee, the formula for career advancement can seem straightforward: outwork everyone. Before long, however, that formula breaks down. Assuming they advance to the next stage, the people exiting the apprenticeship stage often don’t realise that the determinants of success are about to change.

**PREPARE TO BE UNPREPARED**

The reason life gets harder for people who don’t look beyond their immediate tasks is because they don’t get any practice leading others and thinking the big picture (they also miss out on opportunities to create more value for the business and themselves).

They can get the first promotion or two by being an exceptional worker bee. But the brute force method is no longer adequate when the next role entails more than just getting your work done. Management and leadership roles demand more creativity, nuance and people skills than are usually required when you’re cranking away on your own.

Worker bees who don’t know how to do anything but crank away are toast once they start being evaluated along dimensions beyond their own productivity. It is why it’s so important that you deeply understand how you create value for others and for the business overall from the outset of your career.

If you’ve internalised the connection between the immediate tasks you’re working on and the broader business outcomes, then the transition to management is considerably easier.

Conversely, if you can’t explain to someone you manage why their job matters in a larger context, you probably won’t be an effective manager.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Preparing yourself for the leadership phase of your career while you are still in the apprenticeship phase is one of the best, most important things you can do. The earlier you can prepare yourself for how the measures of excellence change as you advance in your career, the smoother your continued ascent will be.

The disconnection between the qualities of a good “doer” and what makes a good manager causes many young professionals to hit a wall when they start to move up, and it’s not hard to see why. It takes practice to get good at these things, but people are given few opportunities to hone these skills until they are already in management roles.

Communication and conflict navigation skills are as essential as your subject matter expertise as you start ascending the ranks. The best leaders aren’t afraid to make waves, but they also know how to channel the conflicts that arise from their ascent into net positives for themselves and their organisations. Only the exceedingly brilliant can survive without these skills, but even they would be better off if they had them.