

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

February 1, 2010

Living By Reflex? Or By Reflection?

by Dr. Mike Armour

The other day, rushing to an appointment, I used my reflection in the elevator door to straighten my tie. Somehow that little act got me to thinking about reflections.

I started noticing how many places we moderns see our reflection. Mirrors are all around us. So, too, are the reflective materials of contemporary construction. Our image bounces back at us from glass doors, glass windows, stainless steel, and polished aluminum. We are reminded of what we look like a dozen times an hour.

Then I began thinking about people of an earlier era. In the ancient world, where did people see their reflection? For the few who could afford them, there were primitive mirrors, commonly made of polished bronze. The reflection, needless to say, begged for clarity and detail.

For commoners, even these imperfect mirrors were a luxury beyond their means. So how did common folk know what they looked like? Primarily from seeing their reflection in quiet streams or lakes or large containers of water.

To see themselves, they had to stop what they were doing and gaze purposefully into the water. There were no hurried, sideways glances as they walked by, the way that we catch quick snapshots of ourselves as we scurry past a mirror.

No Time to Reflect

All of this reflection on reflections got me to thinking about the word "reflection" itself. Somewhere along the line we extended its meaning to include a process of thoughtful contemplation, usually for the purpose of drawing insight or inspiration from things that we have experienced.

This kind of reflection, we all believe, undergirds well-being. We instinctively recognize that unhurried reflection helps keep life in balance. But truth be told, most of us live our life more by reflex than by reflection. Reflection takes time. It calls on us to bring things momentarily to a stop, like the ancient hunter pausing to ponder his reflection in a stream.

But we can't take time to pause. So much is coming at us – and it's coming at us so quickly – that there's simply no time to reflect. Instead, we just react. We resort to reflex. We rely on conditioned responses. Of all the things that our hectic pace has stripped from us, perhaps none is more costly than time to reflect.

Distraction, Not Reflection

In an earlier era, time to reflect was forced upon people. Technology was so limited that large blocks of undistracted time were a daily experience. When the sun went down, there was no TV to watch, no radio to entertain us. Apart from conversation or games around a table, there was little diversion except to read, write, or reflect.

Travel was another time of reflection. Think about riding from Dallas to Houston on horseback 150 years ago. Now contrast that experience with the same trip today in an SUV. What a difference!! Riders on horseback weren't dodging 18-wheelers and navigating wall-to-wall traffic.

And even when traffic is light, we don't know what to do with the down time. We flip through the radio dial. We toss in a CD. We plug in our iPod. Anything to keep us distracted.

Technology, with its promise of more free time, offers to fill that time with unlimited diversion. And what does it divert us from? Among other things, from time to think. From time to reflect. From time to rebalance. To borrow from the title of Neil Postman's 1985 best-seller, we are "amusing ourselves to death."

The Loss of Wisdom

Another casualty of our non-reflective lifestyle is diminished wisdom. Unlike the ancients, we moderns celebrate expertise, not wisdom. How often do you hear someone described as a "very wise man" or a "very wise woman"? Not very often, it seems.

And why not? Perhaps it's because great wisdom develops only from deep reflection. Living at breakneck speeds, we can still gain expertise. But gaining wisdom requires protracted periods of reflection. A world that takes little time to reflect is a world in which wisdom is in woefully short supply.

Absent reflection, we are reduced to living life by reflex. By conditioned response. Generally it works well enough to get us by. At least for the near term. But we are walking on thin ice.

By their very nature, conditioned responses have a short-term, immediate focus. They basically ignore the broader picture, the greater implications of the issue at hand. In our heart of hearts we know that we should pause and consider these larger concerns. But maybe later. There's just no time today.

So we hurry on, reacting reflexively first to this, then to that, stringing life together with one conditioned response after another. Until one day things go terribly wrong. The thin ice begins to shatter beneath our feet. Looking around, we realize that we are not at all where we wanted to be.

It's a dilemma known not only to individuals, but to businesses and institutions, as well. As I coach senior executives, they often tell me, "One of the most valuable elements of my work with you is that our sessions force me to just stop and think about things." How sad that it takes a coaching session to trigger reflection. When senior executives are not leading reflectively, the culture around them is hardly one given to reflection.

Little wonder, then, that we have so few proactive leaders in corporate America or that so few people around us are truly proactive. The primary difference between a reactive life and a proactive life is reflection.

No Quick Glances

Genuine reflection, whether personally or organizationally, cannot be done with a quick glance in the mirror as we rush by. We have to make time for it. When the economy hits rough moments, companies often eliminate corporate retreats in the interest of saving money. But when the going is tough, retreats for the purpose of reflection are more vital than ever.

Individuals, too, must carve out times for reflection. Mirrors at every turn remind us regularly of our outer appearance. But discovering what we look like on the inside takes time. Recognizing where things are out of balance requires reflection.

Breaking a mirror supposedly brings seven years of bad luck. Living without reflection invites far greater disaster.

I would love to reflect on all of this more fully. But I know you're busy. And I've got appointments to make. So maybe later.

This article may be posted to a web site so long as all copyright notices are preserved, along with an associated link to www.leaderperfect.com. You are also free to circulate this document in hard-copy form so long as the copyright statement and this notice remain attached.