

***HOW SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE  
THINK***

***JOHN C. MAXWELL***

***“REFLECTIVE THINKING HAS THREE MAIN VALUES:  
IT GIVES ME PERSPECTIVE WITHIN CONTEXT;  
ALLOWS ME TO CONTINUALLY CONNECT WITH MY  
JOURNEY, AND PROVIDES COUNSEL AND DIRECTION  
CONCERNING MY FUTURE.”***

**How Successful People Think: Learn From  
Reflective Thinking**

# LEARN FROM REFLECTIVE THINKING

*“To doubt everything or to believe everything are two equally convenient solutions; both dispense with the necessity of reflection.”*

—JULES HENRI POINCAR

The pace of our society does not encourage reflective thinking. Most people would rather act than think. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a person of action. I have very high energy and I like to see things accomplished. But, I'm also a reflective thinker. Reflective thinking is like the Crock-Pot of the mind. It encourages your thoughts to simmer until they're done. As I go through this process, my goal is to reflect so that I might learn from my successes and mistakes, discover what I should try to repeat, and determine what I should change. It is always a valuable exercise. By mentally visiting past situations, you can think with greater understanding.

## 1. Reflective Thinking Gives You True Perspective

When our children were young and still lived at home, we used to take them on wonderful vacations every year. When we got home, they always knew that I was going to ask them two questions: “What did you like best?” and “What did you learn?” It didn't matter whether we went to Walt Disney World or Washington, D.C.

I always asked those questions. Why? Because I wanted them to reflect on their experiences. Children don't naturally grasp the value (or cost) of an experience unless prompted. They take things for granted. I wanted my children to appreciate our trips and to learn from them. When you reflect, you are able to put an experience into perspective. You are able to evaluate its timing. And you are able to gain a new appreciation for things that before went unnoticed. Most people are able to recognize the sacrifices of their parents or other people only when they become parents themselves. That's the kind of perspective that comes with reflection.

## 2. Reflective Thinking Gives Emotional Integrity to Your Thought Life

Few people have good perspective in the heat of an emotional moment. Most individuals who enjoy the thrill of an experience try to go back and recapture it without first trying to evaluate it. (It's one of the reasons our culture produces so many thrill seekers.) Likewise, those who survive a traumatic experience usually avoid similar situations at all costs, which sometimes ties them into emotional knots.

Reflective thinking enables you to distance yourself from the intense emotions of particularly good or bad experiences and see them with fresh eyes. You can see the thrills of the past in the light of emotional maturity and examine tragedies in the light of truth and logic. That process can help a person to stop carrying around a bunch of negative emotional baggage.

President George Washington observed, “We ought not to look back unless it is to derive useful lessons from past errors, and for the purpose of profiting by dearly bought experience.” Any feeling that can stand up to the light of truth and can be

sustained over time has emotional integrity and is therefore worthy of your mind and heart.

### **3. Reflective Thinking Increases Your Confidence in Decision-making**

Have you ever made a snap judgment and later wondered if you did the right thing? Everybody has. Reflective thinking can help to diffuse that doubt. It also gives you confidence for the next decision. Once you've reflected on an issue, you don't have to repeat every step of the thinking process when you're faced with it again. You've got mental road markers from having been there before. That compresses and speeds up thinking time—and it gives you confidence. And over time, it can also strengthen your intuition.

### **4. Reflective Thinking Clarifies the Big Picture**

When you engage in reflective thinking, you can put ideas and experiences into a more accurate context.

Reflective thinking encourages us to go back and spend time pondering what we have done and what we have seen. If a person who loses his job reflects on what happened, he may see a pattern of events that led to his dismissal. He will better understand what happened, why it happened, and what things were his responsibility. If he also looks at the incidents that occurred afterward, he may realize that in the larger scheme of things, he's better off in his new position because it better fits his skills and desires. Without reflection, it can be very difficult to see that big picture.

### **5. Reflective Thinking Takes a Good Experience and Makes It a Valuable Experience**

When you were just starting out in your career, did it seem that few people were willing to give someone without experience an opportunity? At the same time, could you see people who had been on their jobs twenty years who yet did their work poorly? If so, that probably frustrated you. Playwright William Shakespeare wrote, "Experience is a jewel, and it had need be so, for it is often purchased at an infinite rate." Yet, experience alone does not add value to a life. It's not necessarily experience that is valuable; it's the insight people gain because of their experience. Reflective thinking turns experience into insight.

Mark Twain said, "We should be careful to get out of an experience all the wisdom that is in it—not like the cat that sits down on a hot stove lid. She will never sit down on a hot stove lid again—and that is well; but also she will never sit down on a cold one anymore." An experience becomes valuable when it informs or equips us to meet new experiences. Reflective thinking helps to do that.

## HOW TO EMBRACE THE LESSONS OF REFLECTIVE THINKING

If you are like most people in our culture today, you probably do very little reflective thinking. If that's the case, it may be holding you back more than you think. Take to heart the following suggestions to increase your ability to think reflectively:

## **1. Set Aside Time for Reflection**

Greek philosopher Socrates observed, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” For most people, however, reflection and self-examination doesn’t come naturally. It can be a fairly uncomfortable activity for a variety of reasons: they have a hard time staying focused; they find the process dull; or they don’t like spending a lot of time thinking about emotionally difficult issues. But if you don’t carve out the time for it, you are unlikely to do any reflective thinking.

## **2. Remove Yourself from Distractions**

As much as any other kind of thinking, reflection requires solitude. Distraction and reflection simply don’t mix. It’s not the kind of thing you can do well near a television, in a cubicle, while the phone is ringing, or with children in the same room.

One of the reasons I’ve been able to accomplish much and keep growing personally is that I’ve not only set aside time to reflect, but I’ve separated myself from distractions for short blocks of time: thirty minutes in the spa; an hour outside on a rock in my backyard; or a few hours in a comfortable chair in my office. The place doesn’t matter—as long as you remove yourself from distractions and interruptions.

## **3. Regularly Review Your Calendar or Journal**

Most people use their calendar as a planning tool, which it is. But few people use it as a reflective thinking tool. What could be better, however, for helping you to review where you have been and what you have done —except maybe a journal? I’m not a journaler in the regular sense; I don’t use writing to figure out what I’m thinking and feeling. Instead, I figure out what I’m thinking and feeling, and then I write down significant thoughts and action points. (I file the thoughts so that I can quickly put my hands on them again. I immediately execute the action points or delegate them to someone else.)

Calendars and journals remind you of how you’ve spent your time, show you whether your activities match your priorities, and help you see whether you are making progress. They also offer you an opportunity to recall activities that you might not have had the time to reflect on previously. Some of the most valuable thoughts you’ve ever had may have been lost because you didn’t give yourself the reflection time you needed.

## **4. Ask the Right Questions**

The value you receive from reflecting will depend on the kinds of questions you ask yourself. The better the questions, the more gold you will mine from your thinking. When I reflect, I think in terms of my values, relationships, and experiences. Here are some sample questions:

- **Personal Growth:** What have I learned today that will help me grow? How can I apply it to my life? When should I apply it?

- **Adding Value:** To whom did I add value today? How do I know I added value to that person? Can I follow up and compound the positive benefit he or she received?
- **Leadership:** Did I lead by example today? Did I lift my people and organization to a higher level? What did I do and how did I do it?
- **Personal Faith:** Did I represent God well today? Did I practice the Golden Rule? Have I “walked the second mile” with someone?
- **Marriage and Family:** Did I communicate love to my family today? How did I show that love? Did they feel it? Did they return it?
- **Inner Circle:** Have I spent enough time with my key players? What can I do to help them be more successful? In what areas can I mentor them?
- **Discoveries:** What did I encounter today to which I need to give more thinking time? Are there lessons to be learned? Are there things to be done?

How you organize your reflection time is up to you. You may want to adapt my pattern to your own values. Or you can try a system that my friend Dick Biggs uses. He creates three columns on a sheet of paper:

Year    Turning Point    Impact

This system is good for reflecting on the bigger picture. Dick used it to see patterns in his life, such as when he moved to Atlanta and was encouraged by a new teacher to write. You could just as easily write “Event,” “Significance,” and “Action Point” on a page to help you benefit from reflective thinking. The main thing is to create questions that work for you, and write down any significant thoughts that come to you during the reflection time.

## 5. Cement Your Learning Through Action

Writing down the good thoughts that come out of your reflective thinking has value, but nothing helps you to grow like putting your thoughts into action. To do that, you must be intentional. When you read a good book, for example, there are always good thoughts, quotes, or lessons that you can take away from it and use yourself. I always mark the takeaways in a book and then reread them when I’m done with the book. When I listen to a message, I record the takeaways so that I can file them for future use. When I go to a seminar, I take good notes, and I use a system of symbols to cue me to do certain things:

- An arrow like this → means to look at this material again.
- An asterisk like this \* next to a marked section means to file it according to the subject noted.

- A bracket like this [ means that I want to use what's marked in a lecture or book.
- An arrow like this ← means this idea will take off if I work at it.

When most people go to a conference or seminar, they enjoy the experience, listen to the speakers, and sometimes even take notes. But nothing happens after they go home. They like many of the concepts they hear, but when they close their notebooks, they don't think about them again. When that happens, they receive little more than a temporary surge of motivation. When you go to a conference, revisit what you heard, reflect on it, and then put it into action; it can change your life.

Ultimately, reflective thinking has three main values: it gives me perspective within context; it allows me to continually connect with my journey; and it provides counsel and direction concerning my future. It is an invaluable tool to my personal growth. Few things in life can help me learn and improve the way reflective thinking can.