

Leadership Journaling

What do you picture when someone suggests trying journaling? Do you think of a writer in an isolated cabin surrounded by cozy books, a snoozing cat, and maybe a crystal glass of inspiration spending hours and hours writing? Or do you think of a social media darling, artfully posing on an empty beach, looking over the ocean in a deep, introspective, and very marketable way? Or maybe you think of a teenager quickly shoving a locked book under the mattress thinking they hear someone coming toward their room?

Well, journaling isn't (necessarily) like any of that. It is a widely researched and supported tool in many disciplines, from therapy to self-development, art to organization. As a leader, you are (or should be) collecting different tools and techniques to continue encouraging and developing your own growth. Being in such a growth mindset for your own self-development while also performing at your job, potentially mentoring others, and still creating balance across your personal, professional, and emotional lives can be a time-demanding demand. So, asking if journaling is worth your time is a perfectly reasonable question, especially from someone whose experience with journaling is more of a "dear diary..." tool and less of a self-development tool.

Research supports that journaling is extremely useful to leaders at all levels and provides many great benefits. It can help you discover, develop, and maintain your personal vision and philosophy. Journaling is a reflective exercise, and as such, can encourage you to be more open to feedback, criticism, and dialog, working hand-in-hand with other mindfulness practices. It is a well-established tool for emotional regulation, and therapists have used journaling as a method of reducing stress, identifying and dismantling mental blocks, and supporting self-reflection. In a very practical way, journaling is also a way to track your personal development journey, prioritize and measure progress toward goals, and provide a record to refer back to for later inspiration.

Studies have shown that people who commit to journaling regularly have very real, positive physical results: a 2018 study showed that routine journaling was associated with decreased mental distress, increased well-being, and enhanced physical function of study participants. (Smyth, Johnson, Auer, Lehman, Talamo & Sciamanna, 2018) A similar study in 2016 showed that inflammation around the heart and other biomarkers related to heart failure morbidity were improved through routine gratitude journaling (Redwine, Henry, Pung, Wilson, Chinh, Knight, Rutledge, Greenberg, Maisel, & Mills, 2016).

Aside from all the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of routine journaling, there is another excellent reason to commit a part of your day to the habit: It doesn't have to take long. No, seriously! There is no right or wrong way to journal. Some people use bullet journals and jot down thoughts and feelings at the end of their workday for five minutes. Others reflect over coffee in the morning, free writing for several pages. My own journal is a collection of drawings, bullet points, snippets of disconnected thoughts and ideas, and longer narratives. I have a colleague whose own journal is neatly organized and color-coded with consistent formatting and another who keeps their own version of a journal digitally. The included reflections in this book act as a journal, allowing you to reflect and capture your thoughts to return to any time for inspiration or insight.

There are so many benefits to journaling and reflection, it would be a huge omission if I did not encourage you to try it out. You can choose the frequency, but I recommend starting with once a week. I like to sit down on a Friday and reflect on my week, capturing my thoughts and experiences. You can also journal daily, every two weeks, or after significant projects – it depends on what fits best into your schedule, and you can adjust this at any time. All it takes is 5 to 20 minutes, and there is no need to force yourself to meet any page length or number of minutes. Just write until you have nothing left to say or run into a block. You can always return to it later if you like. And finally, choose the right tool for you. It may take a few tries...you may find that you dislike sitting with a pen and paper but really enjoy

typing on your phone. There are countless apps, prompted journals, programs, blank journals, and notebooks galore to explore and try out until you get the perfect fit.

If you are still unsure, or if you need inspiration, you can use the prompts below to start your journal. You can answer these questions any way that you like – a few bullet points, a long answer, a short one. They are intended to get you thinking about your own philosophies and values in unexpected ways. Alternatively, they can be used to inspire conversations with your team members or as something to return to later for inspiration. A week is a big challenge, but you may be surprised at how impactful just a few minutes a day can be. You may also be surprised at the inspiration and insight you gain from going back and reading over your thoughts when you come back to it a few weeks or a month later.

Journal Reflections



Try daily journaling for just a week. You can reflect on anything, but if you need inspiration here is a list of suggested questions or topics.

1. What challenges have you had to overcome in your career?
2. If you were to make a “Top Ten” list of your Secret Survival Skills for your career/workplace/etc, what would be on it?
3. What was the most recent Life Lesson you learned?
4. Think of a failure you have had. What did you learn from it?
5. What motivates you? Do you think others have similar or different motivations?
6. Who was the most impactful leader in your life? What made them so impactful?
7. How do you perform better: Competing or Collaborating? How does your team perform better, in a collaborative or competitive environment?
8. Who do you admire most? Why?
9. Think of someone who has played a meaningful role in your life or recently did something for you that you are genuinely grateful for. Write them a thank you note.
10. You have been given an unlimited budget to plan a leadership event at your workplace. What do you plan? Why do you choose the things you do?
11. You have been asked to plan a leadership event at your workplace, but there is little to no budget. What do you plan? Why do you choose the things you do?
12. What words of wisdom guide your actions?
13. Each team member is asked to choose a quote they feel represents themselves or a value they have. What quote do you choose?
14. What is one thing that is bothering you right now? What can you do to change that?

15. You are asked to devise a slogan for your team/office/place of work that will be used in the new company newsletter. What ideas do you have?
16. What is the biggest challenge either you or your team are facing right now?
17. What is the most significant achievement/win either you or your team experienced recently?
18. You have lost your regular stapler, and when you find a replacement deep in the stock room, it turns out to be an enchanted stapler that grants you the ability to change up to three things about your workplace/job/team. What do you wish for? Why?
19. Is there a difference between your personal ethics and business ethics? How does that make you feel?
20. You step into an elevator and one of your role models is in the elevator with you. Initially, you are shocked, but when the elevator breaks down between floors, you have the opportunity to ask or talk about anything with them: what do you say?
21. Write down the name of one of your favorite movies. Using that film as an example, how many unique lessons, morals, or examples can you find related to self-development or leadership?
22. What is something you have done in the past month that has made you proud? Past week? Day?
23. Have you ever experienced bias? In what way? How did you respond to it?
24. Look at the people around you in your workspace. Is there a culture of inclusion? How can you either support or create a greater sense of inclusion or belonging?
25. They say money can't buy happiness and the best things in life are free. So, what are those things? Do you agree or disagree? Is there anything money can buy to bring happiness?
26. Open your smartphone's settings application and find the choice for "screen time" or "digital well-being." How much time did you spend on your phone today? This week? This month? How does that number make you feel? Does it inspire a desire for change, and if so, what kind of change?

27. Your boss wants to completely ban YouTube (TikTok, Facebook, X, etc....) from all company electronics. Is this a good idea or not? In what way can the application(s) provide value to either the organization or to personal development?
28. What song(s) inspire you most?
29. Think of a song that you love. What message does the song have or deeper meaning does the song represent that you would be able to share with someone else?
30. You are asked to be part of your company leadership development committee. Your first task is to select five books or movies you think everyone in the company should watch/read and justify why. What are your recommendations?
31. What is the most memorable work of visual art you have ever seen? What made it so memorable?
32. When was the last time you had a "great conversation"? What was it about?
33. What do you wish your team or supervisor knew about you?
34. You have been hired as a consultant for a very prestigious college and asked to come up with a personal essay topic for future applicants. What question/topic do you assign?
35. Do you think you have a life calling? Are you living that calling right now? Why or why not?
36. What could you teach someone in 5 minutes? How about 2 minutes?
37. In what ways has travel (big or small) affected you or changed your perspective?
38. Imagine turning your personal leadership philosophy into a recipe. If you wrote out that recipe, what would it look like?
39. Are traditions important in the workplace? How can you balance preserving traditions with the need for continual growth and change?
40. When have you spoken out about something you felt needed to change? What happened?