

12@12
Reflection and Performance
November 6, 2014

Americans like to work. At least we have historically, and the data shows that we work a good bit more than many of our European counterparts. Even if we don't work as hard as we used to or as much as some Asian countries, we still like to boast of hard work. Just think of how we say the phrases, "She is a hard worker," or "He does just what he needs to get by." We say the first phrase with respect, and the second with disdain.

We so look up to the value of hard work that if given two comparable products or services we will choose one over the other if we are more aware of the hard work behind its production. For example, Harvard Business School researchers developed "a fictitious travel website and asked people to search for a flight from Boston to Los Angeles." When some participants completed the search they saw a typical progress bar slowly being filled in, but other participants were shown "the work" behind the search. Instead of seeing a progress bar, their screen said things like, "Now searching delta.com..." followed by "Now searching jetblue.com..." Although in the end all participants received the same list of flights and fares, those who saw "the work" behind the search rated the service more highly than those who only saw the progress bar. And, further, "when asked to choose between a site that delivered instant results or one that made them wait but showed its work, most people chose the latter."¹ In other words, we value work so much that we like to see it happening even if our seeing it slows down productivity!

Now, I tend to think that valuing hard work is a good thing. I even believe that we were made to work and that a satisfied life cannot be found by one whose aim is to avoid it at every turn. At the same time, I think that we can press the value of work too far. And when I say this I don't just speak of the detrimental effects of workaholism, I am speaking of the tipping point at which more work does not create more productivity but less.

What would you say if I told you that you could improve your productivity by decreasing the amount of time you spend on doing your

assigned task at work and instead spend more time reflecting on how well you are doing at your work and what you could do to perform better? Researchers recently investigated whether this was true or not. This is how they did their research. They took a team of workers who were being trained for work in a tech support call center. One group of workers were given tasks to do throughout the day to gain the skills they would need on the job. Participants of the second group were told to stop fifteen minutes before the other and were told to take that time to reflect on what they had learned during the day and how they might do better. What were the results? At the end of one month, the employees who had taken the time to reflect outperformed the one who didn't by 23%, and this despite the fact that the non-reflecting group actually "worked" for fifteen minutes more per day.²

Twenty-three percent better results is significant, and significant for any kind of business or organization. What do you think those you report to would think if your productivity, however that was measured, went up by 23% without working any longer than you do now. I think they would be impressed. I think a promotion or a raise might be in your future. But this, of course, requires a discipline—a discipline that is not too easy especially for those of us who for whatever reason have an internal voice telling us to complete one more task in a day. This is me. I want to get things done. When I come to the church in the morning I want to get right at it and when the day is ending I often find myself wanting to cross one more item off my list. And in the process reflection easily gets forgotten. It seems even to be a waste, non-productive. At least that's what the voice inside me says.

The term sabbatical has become a bit more commonplace again. It is the idea of taking some time away from work to pursue something different, to get some rest, to reflect on life and your place in it. I would venture to say that many people have forgotten the origin of the concept of sabbatical. The term comes from the Jewish concept of Sabbath. When the ancient nation of Israel was being formed, God called them to take every seventh day off. More than that, he called them to take every seventh year off and every fiftieth year as well. And this is all in addition to the annual festivals and commemorations that were held. Quite a deal! The purpose of time off was not solely for reflection. It was primarily for rest. It was designed in large part so that people would remember that their success is not bound up wholly in

their effort but in the provision of God. But, nonetheless, you can see that this prescribed time of not working could not help but lend itself to reflecting.

And it seems to me that this kind of prescribed, scheduled reflection is a good thing. It is good for us individually, and it is good for us corporately. Individually, it can keep us from getting stuck in patterns that aren't really working that well. Consider if at the end of the day, you spent time reflecting on how you did your project research. Maybe you ask yourself, "Did I spend too much time searching out an unimportant detail? Did I make clear in my mind the question I was seeking to answer before I got started so I didn't go down unnecessary rabbit trails?" Or perhaps in your time of reflection you examine how you interacted with people that day. You ask, "Did I communicate clearly with my team today the things that needed to be communicated? Did I check in with those I need to check in with, whether they be my peers, or above or below me in the pecking order?" Or you might ask, "Was I firm where I needed to be firm with people and friendly where I needed to be friendly?" I think if we are honest with ourselves we get in behavioral ruts, and we don't manage ourselves or others as well as we should. And reflection is key to making sure we don't stay in that rut longer than we must.

As I said, reflection is not just good individually, it is good corporately. That's why military operations are always debriefed. That's why NFL teams review film on Monday morning. That's why medical emergency teams review the way they handled the latest crisis. A few years back we created a team of people that discuss what our Sunday morning services at BridgePoint look like. This team is helpful in allowing us to communicate and lead better during that Sunday morning time. But I believe that the team really became effective when rather than just discussing what to do with the next Sunday service, it devoted time to reflect on how the last service went. It created a scheduled time when people could honestly share what they thought about the performance of others and what steps might be made to make things better. It is when we started doing that I would say the consistency of what we do on Sunday mornings went up significantly.

I think that any historian would say that Jesus started quite a movement. You read the record of his life and he was a man on a

mission. His aim was to usher in a whole new way of thinking about God that he hoped would spread throughout the world. You would think then that he would have been busy getting his message out every waking moment, and yet curiously we see Jesus regularly getting away from the crowds. And when he sent his earliest followers to further his mission and they returned, he had them take a break as well. One account in particular sums up this dynamic. It reads, “When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida” (Luke 9:10). This was the way of Jesus. He put his feet to the pavement, so to speak, to get his message out. But he did not do so without pulling away from the task and taking time to reflect and pray. And it seems to me that this way of his, did not get in the way of his performance, but enhanced it, just as it can for you and me.

¹ John Beshears and Francesca Gino, “Identifying the Biases behind Your Bad Decisions” *Harvard Business Review*,

<http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/10/identifying-the-biases-behind-your-bad-decisions/>

² Carmen Nobel, “Reflecting on Work Improves Job Performance,”

Harvard Business School, <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/7509.html>