

# The More Senior Your Job Title, the More You Need to Keep a Journal

by Dan Ciampa

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For leaders assuming the CEO title for the first time, taking time to learn and think translates into early successes. But the problem is there's little time to do either. Information comes at them more quickly, more people than ever before demand their time, and they're told that the myriad decisions piled in front of them are all important.

If hired from outside, there is a new culture to get used to and it's not clear who to trust. Even when promoted from inside, the pace can be jarring compared to running a division in the same company. In both cases, any new leader must manage intense exposure (as it sinks in that top leaders have few places to escape to) and unrealistic expectations (of both self and others).

There is nothing new leaders can do to avoid these problems completely. All they can control is how they react to them. Because we tend to make mistakes when things speed up, especially when in unfamiliar territory, it can make all the difference to find ways to slow things down.

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal pointed out that “All of humanity’s problems come from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” He didn’t mean sitting quietly in front of a laptop responding to emails. The best thinking comes from structured reflection – and the best way to do that is keeping a personal journal.

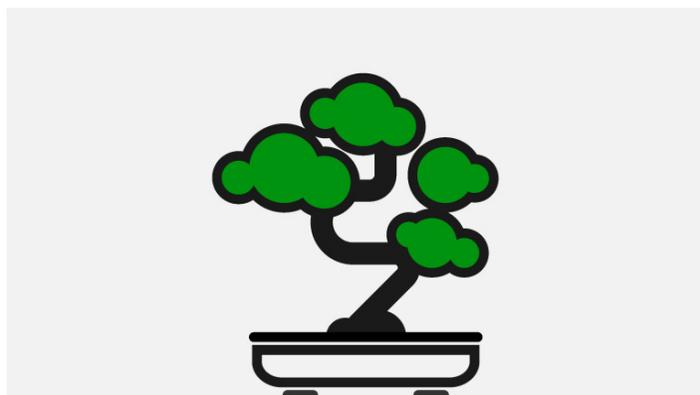
I started keeping a journal when I took over a manufacturing research, software, and consulting firm. I was very young, we were in crisis facing a challenging market, and I wasn’t sure whom I could rely on. I kept a journal through my 12 years as chairman and CEO and have since recommended it to people moving into any senior position for the first time.

There’s strong evidence that replaying events in our brain is essential to learning. While the brain records and holds what takes place in the moment, the learning from what one has gone through – that is, determining what is important and what lessons should be learned – happens after the fact during periods of quiet reflection.

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Also, when we slow things down and reflect, we can be more creative about solving seemingly inscrutable problems. Take, for example, a technique called the “second solution method” that I’ve used in the past. If a group was struggling to come up with options to solve a tough problem, we would brainstorm to identify a list of possible solutions. Before switching to prioritizing, making items specific, etc., we tried to identify all possible options. I found the best approach was to tell the group to take a break and when it reconvened to ask, “What else occurs to you?” Inevitably, this simple question resulted in about 50% more items, often of higher quality. By

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break.

Journal entries should provide not only a record of what happened but how we reacted emotionally; writing it down brings a certain clarity that puts things in perspective. In other cases, it's a form of mental rehearsal to prepare for particularly sensitive issues where there's no one to talk with but yourself. Journals can also be the best way to think through big-bet decisions and test one's logic.

While personality, style, and situation cause different approaches, some guidelines have proven useful for the best results. Notes should be made as soon as possible after an event from which one wants to learn—ideally the same day. Waiting more than 24 hours seems to sacrifice specificity about details that made the most difference and why they happened.

An entry should begin with the primary outcome – the headline that best captures the major result. Then, list the essential reason for that outcome; an always-subtle root cause made apparent by asking “why?” five times to peel back each layer, revealing what came before. (I remember reviewing my journal once and realized that several big-bet decisions turned on the right question asked at just the right point in the debates. Fortunately, my notes were in enough detail that they showed that the same subordinate asked the right question each time. I started listening to him much more closely). Third, recall the emotions that affected decision making and why they flared. Last, identify what you can learn from the whole experience and what you can do differently next time.

Many will opt to keep a journal on their computer or iPad. While that may be more efficient, the point of keeping a journal is not efficiency but to reflect and slow things down so that learning is maximized. For that purpose, handwriting may work better. The novelist Paul Theroux has said that he writes long-hand because, “The speed with which I write with a pen seems to be the speed with which my imagination finds the best... words.” He noted a 2011 Newsweek article that said, “Brain scans show that handwriting engages more sections of the brain than typing [and] it's easier to remember something once you've written it down on paper.”

experimenting, I found that the break that took place between the first and second rounds was more important than the question. A journal is an effective, efficient, private way to take a similar

With so many benefits of keeping a journal, why do so few leaders do it?

- It takes time, a most precious asset. Because a journal requires reflection, it's best done during quiet periods, which are rare for any leader.
- Sometimes, keeping a journal requires reliving something one would just as soon forget. Even though a vital step in learning, it's unpleasant.
- Because many leaders prefer to rapidly move on to the next challenge, reflection is not high on their list of things they enjoy or have much experience with.
- Like any tool, it takes time to perfect the best way to use it. The methodology offered here did not happen right way, but came after many trails and errors.

These are minor drawbacks compared to the benefits. Slowing things down leads to better-thought-through, more effective judgement and to learning what to do more of and what to change. One result, as important as anything, is an increase in the satisfaction that should come from being in charge. A personal journal should be part of any leader's toolkit.

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Dan Ciampa (DC@danciampa.com) is a former CEO, an adviser to boards and chief executives, and the author of five books, including *Transitions at the Top: What Organizations Must Do to Make Sure New Leaders Succeed* (with David L. Dotlich, Wiley, 2015) and *Right from the Start: Taking Charge in a New Leadership Role* (with Michael Watkins, Harvard Business Review Press, 1999).

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**Artem Anoshkin** 2 days ago

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It's a way to empower journaling for the folks who do it on a regular basis.

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