Why It’s Time to Dust Off That Journal

‘I have experienced far more than I expected from my journey into journaling,’ this contributor writes. Maybe you can, too.

March 12, 2019 5 min read

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Call it what you will: a journal, a chronicle, a diary. These documents aren’t just for teenagers scribbling furiously about intoxicating crushes or unsympathetic parents; they’re powerful tools for people of all ages, startup leaders and entrepreneurs included. Look no further than the examples of the powerful memoirs written by Michelle Obama and Melinda Gates.

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Memoirs typically begin as journaled thoughts and ideas, and that makes sense, as there is an inherent beauty in using words to make sense of life’s ups and downs. Maybe that’s why people take advantage of the wide array of advantages that come with putting pen to paper or fingers to a keyboard.

Maybe you’re polishing up your writing to vie for that coveted Mensa invitation; perhaps you’re seeking a distraction from the physical discomforts of the common cold. But whatever your motivation for journaling, this task may just be the most underrated, yet desperately needed, item in any leader’s tool kit.

Aside from being a journaling advocate myself, I know many

entrepreneurial colleagues who insist that daily writing grounds them. They leverage this mode of self-reflection to make outside-the-box decisions, all the while releasing those pent-up pressures that come from “being in charge.” As unglamorous as journaling may seem, it provides a host of benefits, beginning with connecting the dots.

Connecting the dots

Entrepreneurship is one of the craziest rides in the world. Yet spending merely 15 minutes a day writing and documenting allows you to tap into a new level of mindfulness so you can survive the zaniness. I know because I have reveled in writing’s advantages.

Foremost is the fact that, writing allows you to stop reacting and start planning and prioritizing. Journaling makes it easier to develop an objective outlook. Consequently, what seems overwhelming on the surface can take on a much lighter sheen after pause and reflection.

Journaling also can improve your speaking skills. Why? Writing is an organizational process: The more you do it, the easier it becomes. Eventually, your brain gets better at organizing ideas, whether you are writing them or saying them. Having clarity of thought in any situation is a huge asset for anyone with the desire to contribute and succeed.

In a nutshell, expressive writing is incredibly therapeutic. When you jot down complex problems, you free up space in your head. Stepping back, you can see a clearer path to overcome what once seemed to be an insurmountable challenge. This type of introspection keeps you grounded and focused. Additionally, it prevents you from making those same self-defeating mistakes again and again.

How to commit to writing

So, how to begin? If you think you have no time to journal, you are mistaken. Everyone has the same 24 hours. How you use yours can make all the difference. Incorporating journaling into your daily or weekly schedule requires just a few slight changes.

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1. Pick up the habit. Set aside a few minutes to journal every day or so. Just 10 minutes is enough to get your writing going, as long as you do it consistently. Even LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner sets aside no fewer than 90 minutes every day to accomplish tasks other than leading. If he can block off sizable chunks of time, so can you. Be certain to choose a time that works best for your lifestyle, such as before bed or first thing in the morning.

2. Turn off your internal editor and go. Grammar and spelling are not important: Data dumping is. Expose your thoughts, feelings and frustrations without getting too critical. Write what you want, how you want. Journaling is not the time to write the Great American Novel, although you might find that you end up becoming an author thanks to your constant writing. Basecamp co-founder David Heinemeier Hansson has written several books and believes self-directed writing helps his overall efficacy and proliferation.

3. Allow your writing to evolve. Your journaling process will be completely unique to your needs, so allow themes, linkages, triggers and organizational motifs to develop. You may be surprised at how strong your personal brand becomes after systematic journaling for a few weeks or months. Take Elon Musk, for example. His social media account has been heralded as a look into the real deal, who he is at the core. In other words, even 280-character entries can illustrate your essence as effectively as a longer, manuscript-length book might.

Related: 5 Goal-Setting Journals to Take You From Intention to the Finish Line

Although one of my own reasons for journaling was to prepare me to write an upcoming book, I have experienced far more than I expected from my journey into journaling. Make no mistake: The benefits of writing will far surpass your expectations. Best of all, you can do it anytime and anywhere — starting now.

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