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Here’s How Self-Centeredness Can Make You More Considerate

Step one: Consider your own death.

A bust of Alfred Nobel. [PHOTO: OLIVIER MORIN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES]

BY DAVID MAYER

In our fast-paced, social media–obsessed, personal brand–fixated society, some say we’re becoming more narcissistic and self-centered. And maybe we are. But since it’s so natural to think of oneself, maybe the better question than how to do less of it is how to turn that habit to better use. And in fact, a mounting body of research hints at a paradoxical possibility: Thinking about yourself–in one way in particular–might actually make you more considerate of others.

WHAT WILL YOUR LEGACY BE?

Thinking about ourselves, especially where our legacies are concerned, leads to actions focused on how other people will benefit.

First, a story. When you hear the name “Nobel,” no doubt you think of the Nobel prizes, designed to celebrate academic, cultural, and scientific advances. The Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel established these awards near the turn of the 19th century, and they’ve served as his beneficent legacy since his death in 1896.

But the story could’ve been different. In 1888, Nobel’s brother died, and a newspaper erroneously published an obituary for Alfred. Nobel, who’d amassed a fortune by inventing dynamite, read his own obituary. It was titled, “The Merchant of Death Is Dead” and described him as a man whose wealth rested on “finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before.” Nobel was alarmed. He wanted his life to have meant something more positive, and donated nearly all of his assets (which would have been worth U.S. $3.1 billion today) to establish the Nobel prizes.

Legacy isn’t something that only 19th-century industrialists thought about. Consider a few recent headlines: “Tim Cook’s Stance on Privacy Could Define His Apple *Legacy*”; “The *Legacy* of Antonin Scalia—The Unrelenting Provoker”; “The Greatness of Kobe Bryant’s *Legacy* Is Clear Where It Matters Most.” Our society scrutinizes leaders’ actions, and their legacies follow suit, taking shape during their own lifetimes.

That hasn’t been lost on the leadership industry. Robert Galford and Regina Maruca’s book *Your Leadership Legacy* argues that thinking about how you’ll be remembered is crucial to developing decision-making skills that line up with your values (you can even take their survey to evaluate your own leadership legacy). In the best-selling classic *A Leader’s Legacy*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner see it rather grandly:

By asking ourselves how we want to be remembered, we plant the seeds for living our lives as if we matter. By living each day as if we matter, we offer up our own unique legacy. By offering up our own unique legacy, we make the world we inhabit a better place than we found it.

And they’re not alone in that sentiment. Similar books abound, like *Leading with Your Legacy in Mind* by Andrew Thorn and *What’s Your Legacy?* by Jacqueline Moore and Steven Sonsino, not to mention the host of articles in *Fast Company*, *Forbes*, *Businessweek*, and others that all ask us to think about about ourselves in much the same legacy-minding terms.

WIDENING THE FRAME OF THOUGHT

The thing is, they may not be wrong to do so.

According to a number of recent studies, Charles Dickens may have had it right all along: Scrooge's moral about-face in *A Christmas Carol* is the product of hard self-reflection–something he never had time (or inclination) to do during his relentless business life. Likewise, psychologists are now finding that thinking about ourselves, especially where our legacies are concerned, leads to actions that focus on how other people will benefit.

Research by Kim Wade-Benzoni at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and several of her colleagues, including Leigh Tost and Morela Hernandez, seems to suggest one reason why. As Wade-Benzoni writes, "Creating a positive legacy offers people a means of symbolic immortality." This striving for "eternal existence" tends to help leaders fixate on what matters most to them and less on near-term gains.

"Creating a positive legacy offers people a means of symbolic immortality."

The only problem, of course, is that virtually everything about the modern business world incentivizes near-term strategic thinking and leaves little room for–or even outright discourages–the reverse.

Leaders in particular have a lot to do, from executing daily tasks to making sure quarterly financial reports look good. Plus, thinking about your death just isn't fun. But if you can get past the discomfort, you're more likely to widen the lens through which you view your own decisions. It can help you consider not just their direct consequences but their indirect and more lasting repercussions, too. And it's *those*that you'll have to square with your values.

Even if that's something we can't ever fully achieve, it's a helpful benchmark to strive toward. Take it from Steve Jobs, a brilliant, complicated, and imperfect leader who put it memorably:

Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.

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