

Boost Your Memory for Better Leading

There's a certain kind of memory that holds a crucial key to being a good leader. It's not your memory of numbers, names, lists, or processes. No, it's your autobiographical memory, as described in *Total Memory Makeover* (Gallery Books, simonandschusterpublishing.com). Here are steps to help you remember and learn from your personal choices so that you make the best possible decisions now and in the future – not just for your organization but for your life as a whole.

Get ready to remember. Prime yourself. Be active in looking at your past with wide-open eyes. To put your memory to good use, you need to set an intention to remember.

Whatever situation you're in right now, recall how you responded in similar circumstances. You can learn from faulty decisions as well as wise choices from the past.

Be sure you have a rich, deep bank of memories to draw on. You can create that memory bank in numerous ways. For example, keep a journal of decisions you make. After you learn the consequences of a decision, write it in your journal, along with ideas for alternate choices that might have worked out better. Or simply pay special attention whenever you make a choice, and keep close tabs on how it turns out.


Stimulate your five senses – sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch – to access times you want to remember. Use those same senses in the present to solidify a memory in your mind so that you can return to it later. Your sensory receptors are like portals into your past.

Notice how you access your memories: Do you see random images or a sequence of events? Do you watch yourself in the activity or see it through your own eyes, the way you originally lived it? The more you understand your process of recall, the better control you'll have in retaining and reliving activities from your past.

Take some time each day to go back into your memories. Memory is like a muscle that needs to be used. Practice memory skills by keeping a calendar, filling in a planner, and writing down memories as they come to you.

Compare your memories with those of other people. It's astonishing to see how differently people recall the same event. Remembering together is a good way for you and others to clarify where decisions went wrong – or right – so you can gain insight.

Ask yourself throughout the day: What from your past can you connect to what you're doing right now? If you're stressed, for example, when did you feel that way before? What may have triggered it then? Is that what's happening now? Analyzing causes can help you resolve problems that seem to reoccur.

Be totally in the present moment. Be aware of what's happening, how you're feeling, and what others are doing and saying. The more information you receive now, the better you'll remember later. 

Signals, Signifying Nothing

As the amount of information in the world explodes, how can you separate meaningful signals from irrelevant “noise” – information that's useless for making predictions? That's the question Nate Silver examines in illuminating detail in *The Signal and the Noise* (penguinrandomhouse.com). Here are some of his insights into how to make reliable forecasts so that you can plan a better future for your organization:

Make the most of the limited data you have available, and be willing to update your forecasts as new information arrives. Don't mistake changing your mind for showing weakness. The reverse is true. Failing to change your forecast when the facts change shows a lack of wisdom and courage.

Listen to other people's perspectives, and look for consensus. Group forecasts are more reliable than individual ones (between 15 and 20% more accurate).

Respect ambiguity. Understand that there is rarely just one, clear-cut answer. There's no more useful quality than knowing what you don't know.

State your predictions in probabilities, not certainties. Rather than forecasting as if you know exactly what will happen, articulate a range of possible outcomes, and plan for different scenarios.


Think like a fox, not a hedgehog. As the old quote goes, “The fox knows many little things. The hedgehog knows one big thing.” Foxes are better forecasters than hedgehogs, because they take many approaches and are more tolerant of complexity, nuance, and dissenting opinions. “If hedgehogs are hunters, always looking for the big kill, then foxes are gatherers,” in Silver's words. Shrewd forecasters continually collect information and adjust their predictions accordingly.

Weigh qualitative as well as quantitative factors. Sometimes information that can be observed but not measured is more useful than statistical results.

Understand the influence your assumptions play in your forecasts. Question yourself about your biases. Be realistic about the limits of human judgment in making predictions.

Don't confuse the unfamiliar with the improbable. Just because something hasn't happened yet, or has happened only rarely, doesn't mean it can't or won't happen.

Recognize that the amount of confidence someone expresses in a prediction isn't a good indicator of its accuracy. To the contrary. The more certain people are of their forecasts, the more cautious you should be in embracing their ideas.

Keep making predictions, even though your knowledge is imprecise and ever-changing. The worst thing you can do is to give up in frustration and stop making forecasts altogether. The saddest failure of all is a failure of imagination. 

Major Gifts: How Does Your Organization Compare?

Major gifts make up as much as 80% of a typical nonprofit's charitable income in a year. Yet we still know remarkably little about major gifts. For instance, how large are they? What tools do organizations use to gain major gifts and which of those methods work best?


We now have answers to those questions along with some useful baselines. The first-ever major-gift study, "Major Gifts Fundraising Benchmark Study," sponsored by MarketSmart (imarketsmart.com, fundraisingreportcard.com), surveyed more than 600 nonprofit organizations in the U.S. and Canada about their major-gift practices. The major takeaways:

Half of the respondents consider "major gifts" to fall in the range of \$5,000 to \$9,999 or higher.

A quarter of the respondents believe "major gifts" to be from \$1,000 to \$2,499. However, the study noted that a major gift can be defined as *any* amount that's significant to the organization.

About four in ten respondents consistently use a process to identify major-gift prospects. Of those, the majority (74%) meet their major-gift fundraising goals.


Four methods of prospect identification are clearly associated with helping organizations meet their major-gift fundraising goals: (1) conducting prospect research; (2) asking for referrals from current donors, volunteers, and other advocates; (3) analyzing the organization's donor database/CRM; (4) tracking which donors engage online or interact with the organization's digital content.

More than half (54%) said that having enough staff (or enough time in their own day) to get the work done is their biggest challenge in raising major gifts, followed by 47% who mentioned board involvement in fundraising, and 41% who identified creating gift opportunities to match donor interests. This list of top challenges varied little by organization size. 

Simplifying Finances for the Non-Expert

Many leaders of small organizations view finance as a mundane nuisance. But without proper financial control, an organization can quickly find itself in irreversible trouble.

Basic Accounting for Community Organizations and Small Groups (Practical Action Publishing, practicalactionpublishing.org) is for the non-expert. It's especially useful for small organizations that rely heavily on volunteers and whose board members may not be familiar with nonprofit record-keeping. The examples, work sheets, and step-by-step explanations are clear and understandable.

You'll want to look at this book if you're on a board that doesn't provide financial training. The book will give you a better understanding of basic nonprofit statements, from budgeting to tracking contributions and daily financial activities. It may demonstrate areas for improvement in financial record-keeping for your organization. 

— reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

For Greatest Effect, Become a Touchpoint Leader

One of your most important tasks as a leader is to connect other people. Indeed, in *Touchpoint Leadership* (KoganPage Publishing, koganpage.com) Hilary Lines and Jacqui Scholes-Rhodes posit that collaborative energy is at the very heart of successful leadership. Without it, they say, no organization can be effective. Here's how to crack the code:

Look for touchpoints – critical points of interaction between people in your organization and between organizations. Put your energy into enhancing the quality of those connections.

Reconsider your leadership through the lens of relationships. Look for patterns that hinder your relationship skills, and work on changing those patterns. Replace habits you may have used as a directional leader into more collaborative ones.

Embrace the differences between people and groups. Affirm the positive qualities of these differences. Value the friction that diversity often causes, and see how you can use it as a source of positive energy. In doing so, notice how you help liberate creativity, talent, and potential.

Be willing to be vulnerable in your interactions with others. Doing so will help you grow, intentionally and consciously, as a leader.

Suspend judgment – even when hearing contradictions to deeply held values.

See excellence as constantly being in a learning place rather than "getting it right."

And, to inform your skills as a collaborative leader, ask these simple questions of yourself:

How conscious are you of your impact in conversations and meetings? Do others feel energized and inspired by your presence?

If you could have access to one more relationship to help you deal with a current challenge, what would it be?

How can you avoid the temptation to smooth over, ignore, or cover up differences rather than use them to create energy and purpose?

Which relationships inspire you, and which ones drain your energy? What are you doing to help or hinder connections in these relationships?

How can you enjoy ambiguity and keep from rushing to a decision?

Where is trust being built, and where is it being eroded? How can you address these issues *together*?



Harness Your Brain to Achieve Your Goals

In *Three Simple Steps* (BenBella Books, benbellabooks.com, trevorgblake.com), Trevor Blake provides a map to reaching the greatest dreams possible for yourself and your organization. The three steps are:

1. Embrace your mental freedom. Understand that you have complete control over what you think and feel.

2. Create winning ideas. Rewire your neural networks to enhance moments of insight.

3. Transform your ideas into achievements. Using discipline and confidence in your brain's power, turn your insights into reality.

Here are some keys to completing the three steps:


Think big. Set your intentions higher than what you want – as high as you possibly can. Doing so makes your original desire feel more attainable. You'll find yourself not only embracing it but reaching beyond it.

Imagine that what you want has already happened. Transport yourself into the future, and see yourself experiencing what you desire. This mental trick is magical, because your mind will automatically fill in the detail of what it took to get there, laying out a map for you to follow.

Spend quiet time alone. In this noisy world, you may not be able to find silence. But silence and stillness aren't the same. You can quiet your mind even when you're surrounded by sound. Take a few minutes to relax, take deep breaths, and think of nothing except your breathing.

Think of your pen as a magic wand. Write out your intentions every day. As you write, you imagine and focus, which creates more detail in your imagination. Carry those written intentions with you and read them often throughout the day.

Take every chance to connect with nature. When you step into the natural world with awareness, you have access to its harmony, unity, and unlimited potential. Take coffee and lunch breaks out-of-doors, and encourage others in your organization to do so, too. Rearrange the furniture so people can see outside. Bring in plants. Hold brainstorming sessions in the natural environment, and everyone will come up with better results. When you connect to nature's matrix, it speeds up your rewiring, because you draw more energy through each new connection.

Understand the difference between determination (the fixing of a purpose) and discipline (a daily, systematic regimen). Determination requires discipline, not the other way around. Blake's three steps and methods for achieving them are simple, but they won't lead to success unless you adhere to them regularly. Schedule time with yourself the way you would formal business appointments. Make it a priority. 

Coming to Grips with Diverse Cultures

Because all organizations contain cultural diversity, anyone can benefit from the wisdom in *The Culture Solution* by Deirdre B. Mendez (deirdremendez.com, nicholasbrealey.com). As she explains, we all operate according to cultural scripts, unconsciously replicating the patterns we've learned from the people around us. It's vital to understand how your cultural script differs from that of people from other backgrounds.

Consider the case of a group of Japanese men who came to a presentation in the U.S. and then slept through the whole thing. They were exhausted from working around the clock, but their culture considers it more respectful to sleep during a meeting than to skip it altogether. What they consider a sign of respect, those from the U.S. interpret as an insult – unless they're culturally literate.

Mendez describes how to analyze your own cultural profile and the profiles of others so that you can communicate in ways that will resonate with them. Some examples:

Traditional U.S. culture encourages direct communication, but many other cultures prefer to be indirect. In contacts with such people, Mendez suggests the following: Suggest opinions instead of expressing them forthrightly. Avoid confrontation. Imply criticism rather than stating it directly.

Many cultures favor undemonstrative rather than expressive communication. What to do in these cases: Present proposals in a calm, unemotional manner. Maintain the appearance of emotional detachment from your ideas. Show self-control in emotional situations.

Some cultures prioritize networks over processes. In such situations: Don't rush discussions. Indicate that an improved relationship is your ultimate goal. Emphasize mutual gain.

Few people have received the training needed for cultural competence. This thorough, engaging book will fill that gap. It will help you look beyond your own biases so that you don't mistake cultural scripts for individual traits. It will show you how to manage conflict, build relationships, and improve collaboration across the full cultural spectrum.

For another take on the theme of culture, see "Do You Need a Translator? Make Sure People Understand Your Message" (Vol. 36, No. 1) at NonprofitWorld.org. 

Nonprofits Receive Poor Scores in Online Fundraising

Most nonprofits receive mediocre or failing grades in their online fundraising practices, improving only slightly or even regressing since the first study five years ago, according to the "Online Fundraising Scorecard 2.0" (onlinefundraisingscorecard.com) by Dunham+Company (Dunhamandcompany.com).

The study gave most nonprofits a failing or mediocre grade when scored against tested and proven online best practices. Of the 151 organizations surveyed for the study, 100 scored 75% or below.

The researchers went to the organizations' websites and signed up (or at least tried to sign up) to receive the organizations' e-communications. They then monitored the

responses they received from each nonprofit. Next, they gave a \$20 online donation and monitored each nonprofit for how it responded. Every part of the experience was documented and analyzed, using 46 key indicators in four critical parts of online fundraising: e-mail registration, e-mail communication, the donation experience, and the gift acknowledgment process.


A sampling of the findings compared to five years ago:

Only 64% of e-mail signups could be located in less than 10 seconds, a drop from 76% five years ago, meaning it's even more difficult now for potential donors to engage.

61% of nonprofits personalized their e-mails with a first and last name, which is up significantly from 21% but still surprisingly low.

Despite a rise in one-click donation forms, nonprofits received lower overall grades for optimizing their donation pages for maximum conversion rates. Percentages fell from 76% to 69%.

80% of organizations sent an immediate thank-you note after a donation, down from 94%.

As online transactions become more common, the nonprofit sector clearly isn't keeping up, likely costing it millions of dollars. The study shows that nonprofits are putting up unnecessary roadblocks to donors giving online. Virtually every nonprofit could improve the online giving experience for its donors, the study's authors note. 

Ask the Right Questions

To form a well-functioning team, make organization-wide efforts to ask good questions. Make inquiries with intention, discuss and analyze your answers, and move forward with action steps based on those assessments. Begin with these:

What kind of employee surveys do you conduct on a regular basis? Do you measure employee engagement (how positive and productive people are)? If so, how do your workers score on this measure? Do you know why?

Do you know which employment factors correlate highly with engagement among your employees?

What are you doing to strengthen your organization's brand for internal stakeholders? Are you targeting your recruitment activities accordingly?

How do you promote a diverse workforce, including diversity of background, opinion, and attitude?

Do you do your best to understand, respect, and empathize with all the people who comprise your organization?

Have you developed a way to talk to employees about the importance of continual change and growth? Can you make a strong case for the value of change?

How would you describe your organization's culture? Are what you do, say, and believe aligned with that culture?

Do you create an environment that's flexible, health-inducing, and fun for employees? 

—adapted from *Talent, Transformation, & the Triple Bottom Line* (Jossey-Bass, josseybass.com)

Deciding How to Decide

Even seemingly small decisions can reverberate. Before rushing into any commitment, ask yourself these questions:

What's the key decision you're trying to make?

What are the possible long-term consequences, good and bad? The greater the ramifications, the more time you should take to commit to an option.

What are your decision-making weaknesses and strengths? Look back over some of the best and worst decisions you've made and tease out the commonalities. Do you tend to trust people too readily? Do you make impulsive choices without doing research and asking experts for their insights? Be more cautious when making decisions related to your weaknesses.


What's influencing this decision? Are you feeling pressure? If so, put a little distance between you and the pressure you're feeling. Tell anyone who is pressing for a decision that you need to take some time to think about it.

How often do you make decisions about situations like this? Have you taken steps to overcome your lack of experience in making this type of decision? Have you worked to counteract any problems you've encountered when making such judgments in the past?

Do you have all the information you need to make the decision?

What emotions are you feeling? Are you stressed out, angry, tired, or out of sorts? If so, delay your decision until you're in a better emotional state.

What are the risks? With decisions you make rarely, such as deciding whether to build a new facility, you're likely to take your time and consult many experts. But decisions you make more often may lead to the most dangerous outcomes because you've become desensitized. For instance, if you frequently hire new people, the process may feel so familiar that you become cavalier about it. Yet the risk of hiring the wrong person is still great unless you have a good decision-making system in place.

Are you relying on your instincts? Your intuition can be useful, but back it up with facts whenever you can. When something seems instinctual, it may be because it's what you've always relied on in the past — which doesn't mean it's the right decision for this time and place. Whenever possible, verify. 

— adapted from *Dangerous Instincts* by Mary Ellen O'Toole (penguin.com)

