

Developing and carrying out a plan to improve yourself will boost your leadership abilities, but a cluttered soul will diminish your performance. Attend to your disappointments, losses, resentments, injustices, and failures to generate success.

Own Your Refrigerator—Attend to the Leftovers

Stephen K. Hacker

How can you trust a leader who displays poor leadership of self? A strong case can be made for leaders to build their personal strategic plans based upon clearly understanding their life's purpose and vision before leading others. Recent research has shown that leaders who have a strong sense of personal direction are more effective in leading others.¹

Developing this sense of meaning can begin any time, but the earlier the better. As with the newborn's diary, shown in Figure 1, the process begins with reflection. So, no matter your age, take the time to realize why you are on this planet and where you might be going.



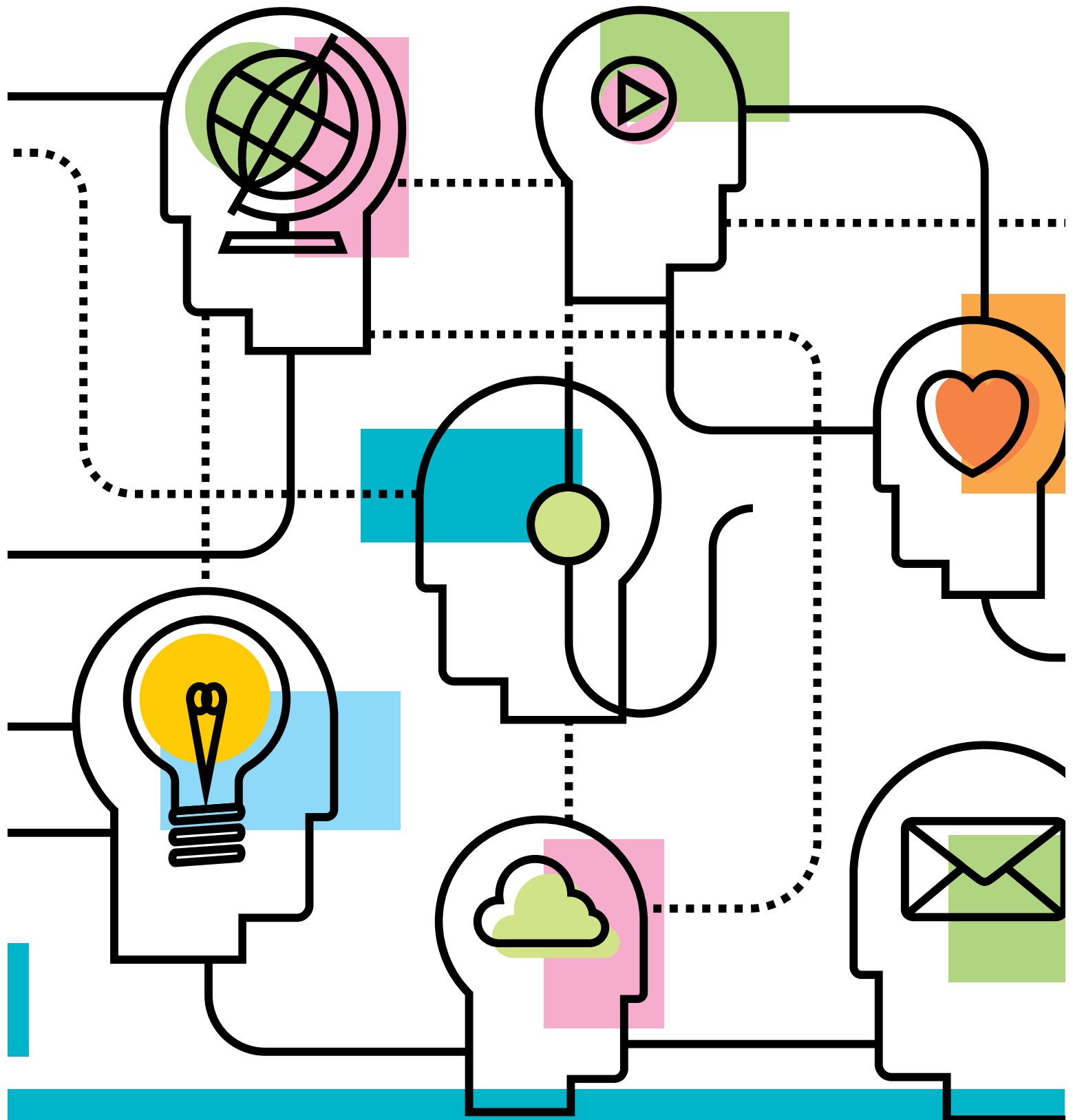
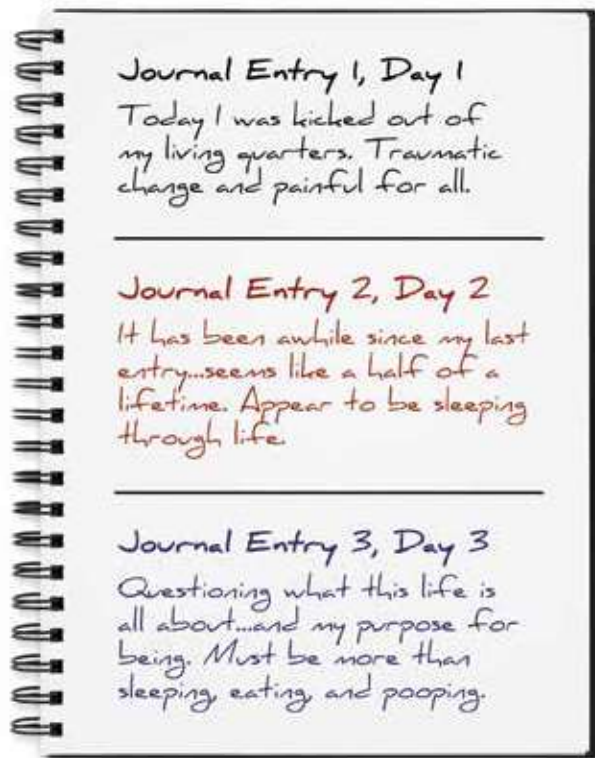


Figure 1: Newborn's Diary



Getting Started

Where should you begin your process of reflection? Sit down and write your response to the question, "Why am I here?" Any answer is better than no answer. You can sharpen your response through time, testing the truth of your purpose statement. This initial statement will be honed as you continue to examine the fit of your purpose declaration, moving to more precise versions. From this ever-strengthening foundation of a personal purpose statement, a five-year vision can be created along with a set of values, which will provide boundaries for your actions. Short-term goals and actions then can be cast in light of your purpose, vision, and values. You are seeking to and will benefit from alignment of your actions with your life's purpose. This alignment creates a strong leader of self. Just like an organization, you have a grounded strategic plan where you are building a life of meaning, as indicated in Figure 2.

You may already have begun this purpose, vision, values discovery in earnest. Bravo! If so, you probably have come to appreciate that the essence of leadership performance emanates from your inner strength, a strong sense of being. This is the straightforward power of leading yourself. When you know where you are going, people are better able to follow and support that direction. Conversely, when you don't know where you are going, it is difficult to have followers.

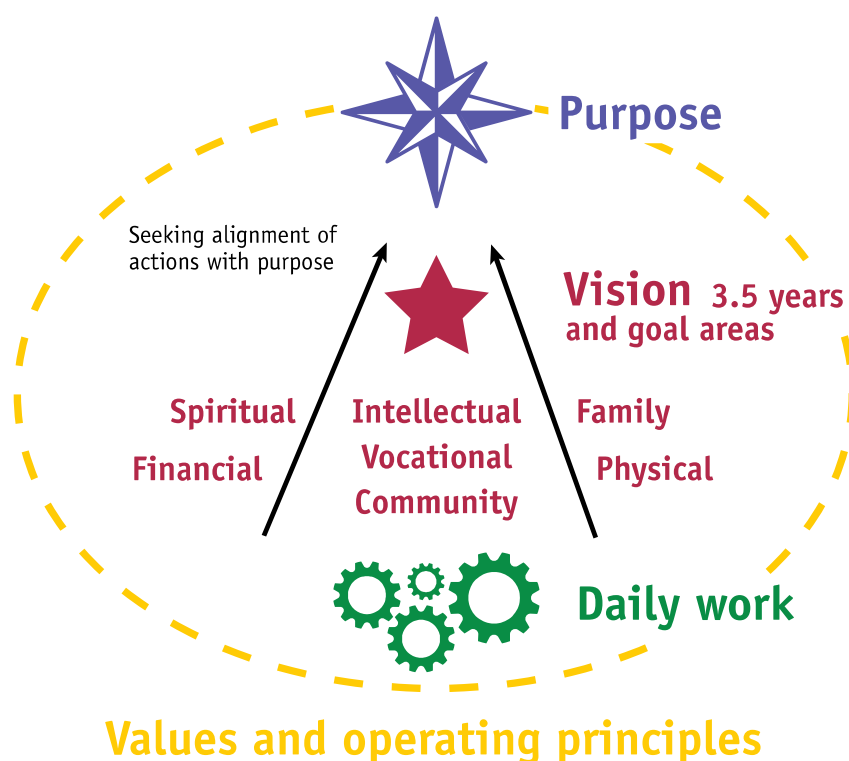
Finding Spirit and Soul

Along the journey, however, while expressing your purpose for being, you may have noticed that although your spirit is alive in creating a life of meaning, some leftovers from past experiences occasionally dampen your energy. These leftovers include broken relationships, numerous regrets, substantial failures, or significant losses. They all may show up in your dreams or in the back of your mind at strange times or as a small siren calling for an energy investment to reexamine these past experiences—even though you may have wrestled with them many times. These unresolved experiences hamper the spirit, creating a downward spiral for which no discernable benefit can be identified. Negative self-talk, guilt, and a good dose of shame appear as a pit with seemingly no way out. There is a loss of energy and effectiveness. Your mind races while traveling down a worn path that leads to nowhere. What should you do when this happens? An investigation of this dynamic might be helpful.

Spirit and soul are two important words that have many ancient definitions, and sometimes they are used interchangeably. You should consider your spirit as your "breath of life," the source of your thoughts, words, and actions. A spirit of hate creates hate in the mind, speech, and actions. On the other hand, a spirit of love creates love in the mind, speech, and actions. Your spirit flows out of you and creates the world you see and within which you live. It is the creative energy you were born possessing, expressing itself in your own unique way.

Consciously choosing the nature of your spirit, one that aligns with your purpose, generates the vision you adopt. Consider the descriptors of the spirit you intend to harness. Does your spirit

Figure 2: Leading a Life of Meaning



include attributes such as generosity, abundance, scarcity, jealousy, caring, nurturing, anger, domination, charity, community, and/or competition? A seemingly exhaustive list of spirit descriptors exists, but be careful because the different choices you can make will lead you down different roads. According to the Dalai Lama, "...when you feel anger or hatred, you may think, 'Yes, now anger is bringing me more energy, more decisiveness, swifter reactions;' however, when you look more closely, you can see that the energy brought about by negative emotions is essentially blind."²

Now, see your soul as the vessel of what is essentially you, apart from the physical body and transcending the mind. As a container, the soul holds your thoughts and emotions of the past. Although not a perfect history of your past, your soul reflects impressions and interpretations of your past. These help to define the current you, the essence of you. A sense of the joys and hurts

of life are found in the soul. Actual memories may be full of faults, but you have taken these experiences as shaped by the spirit you had at the time, combined with your current level of self-awareness, and have declared this is you now. As you move forward, it is important to remain aware of how and what you feed your soul. Your spirit produces substances for the soul, but attending to the leftovers is equally as important.

The soul, like a refrigerator, can hold nutritious food to sustain and power your purpose. Your highest self-image and the understanding of your reason for being are key elements of your soul. At the same time, though, you can clutter your soul with spoiled leftovers, unresolved issues. Leftovers found in the

soul or in a refrigerator don't get better over time. You may close the door today, but when you reopen it later, time did not treat the leftovers well. Consuming spoiled food is unhealthy; it can make you sick. Eating the failures and disappointments of your past, re-running the video tapes of lost loves, chewing on dumb mistakes or long-age missteps, and dining on a host of regrets are all toxic to achieving your purpose.

You may strive to simply forget unpleasant past occurrences, erase them from your memory, and attempt to overlook these leftovers in your refrigerator, but they come back in many different ways. Casting a blind eye to what you have shoved into the back of your fridge—or the crevasses of your soul—fails to grant peace. As Luis Miguel wrote, "I think we all wish we could erase some dark times in our lives. But all of life's experiences, bad and good, make you who you are. Erasing any of life's experiences would be a great mistake."³

Dealing With Leftovers

How then do we move forward in life without the wounding effects of leftovers? Here are three specific strategies to put leftovers in their proper places.

Attend to Your Soul

It is essential to pay attention to who you are and who you are becoming. Your soul is too important to allow it to develop accidentally. Take stock of what you put into your soul. Keep the junk food out, and fill your soul with spirit-enriched food—purposeful thoughts, words, and meaningful experiences. These words from Hillel the Elder summarize this strategy well. “Watch your thoughts; they become your words. Watch your words; they become your actions. Watch your actions; they become your habits. Watch your habits; they become your character. Watch your character; for it will become your destiny.”⁴

Diversionary addictions contribute to a deadening of the soul. By constantly seeking stimulation from the outside, chasing the next activity fix, the soul is put to the side. The adrenalin addiction (a chemical addiction) is the body telling the mind what to do, insisting the soul be kept out of the driver’s seat. Leading self represents the opposite of this relationship, where the soul directs the mind and body. Don’t neglect your soul; don’t lose your identity. Connect with your soul, be it through silence, prayer, meditation, singing, weaving, emptying; there are myriad methods. Attending to your soul by bringing forth who you really are will allow you to place the mind in its right place. The poisonous nature of the leftovers in your soul is generated in large part by an untamed mind. When your mind takes full charge, it tends to suppress your soul. For example, instead of being a person of hope, the mind starts a worry generator that runs without stopping. Instead of being a person of faith, doubts consume you. Leading self is rooted in knowing self; therefore, invest in knowing yourself, and knowing yourself is different than becoming conscious of your thinking process.

Tasha Eurich noted in her study of self-awareness that 95 percent of people thought they were self-aware when, in reality, the population was closer to 10–15 percent. She utilized an assessment that

included several elements of self-awareness (values, passions, aspirations, fit, personality, strengths/weakness, and impact on others) and required input from an outside observer as well as a self-evaluation. The difference in self-perception versus measured performance can be found in the misconception that thinking about yourself isn’t related to knowing yourself. Having thoughts run through your head, some on endless do-loops, does not denote self-awareness. In fact, just thinking about yourself leads to high dissatisfaction. You see the mistakes in the past over and over again. The way forward shared by Eurich is to focus less on the “why” situations occurred and more on the “what” are your next steps for moving forward.⁵ This purpose-driven orientation is the way to free yourself from the downward-spiraling path. By focusing on purposeful work, you can stop the mind from going in circles. Your creative spirit will be moved to seek a way forward instead of languishing in past troubles. Nourish your soul with meaningfulness, gratitude, and challenge.

Attending to your soul means putting it in a directive position over your mind and body. Your body and mind do deliver important information, but it is dangerous to have them in charge.

Address Spoiled Leftovers

Make room in your soul by addressing spoiled leftovers. This is not a call to hide or forget past hurts, mistakes, and failures. Rather it is a call to forgive yourself and others, make amends, and move forward. Joan Borysenko speaks to the importance of forgiveness of self and others in soul building. “The process of making sense of our wounds is a very personal one. But a common theme in wound-healing is the universal need to forgive. If we don’t forgive ourselves for our mistakes and others for the wounds they have inflicted upon us, we end up crippled with guilt. And the soul cannot grow under a blanket of guilt because guilt is isolating; while growth is a gradual process of reconnection to ourselves, to other people, and to a large whole.”⁶

Shame, guilt, blame, and denial are not nourishing foods. Forgiveness is key to addressing spoiled leftovers in one’s soul. Although the words associated with forgiveness may roll easily off your

tongue, the chief barrier in bringing forgiveness to action must be recognized—vulnerability. Brené Brown brought an emphasis to the role of being vulnerable to the forefront in her writings and public addresses. She asserts vulnerability as a way to address leftovers from both the past and in the future. “The thing that I have learned is that vulnerability is at the center of fear and shame, but it is also at the center of joy and gratitude and love and belonging... If we continue to wake up every day and put our game faces on and think that invulnerability is the way to be... then we pay the price because I don’t know that we would ever fully experience joy and love and belonging.”⁷

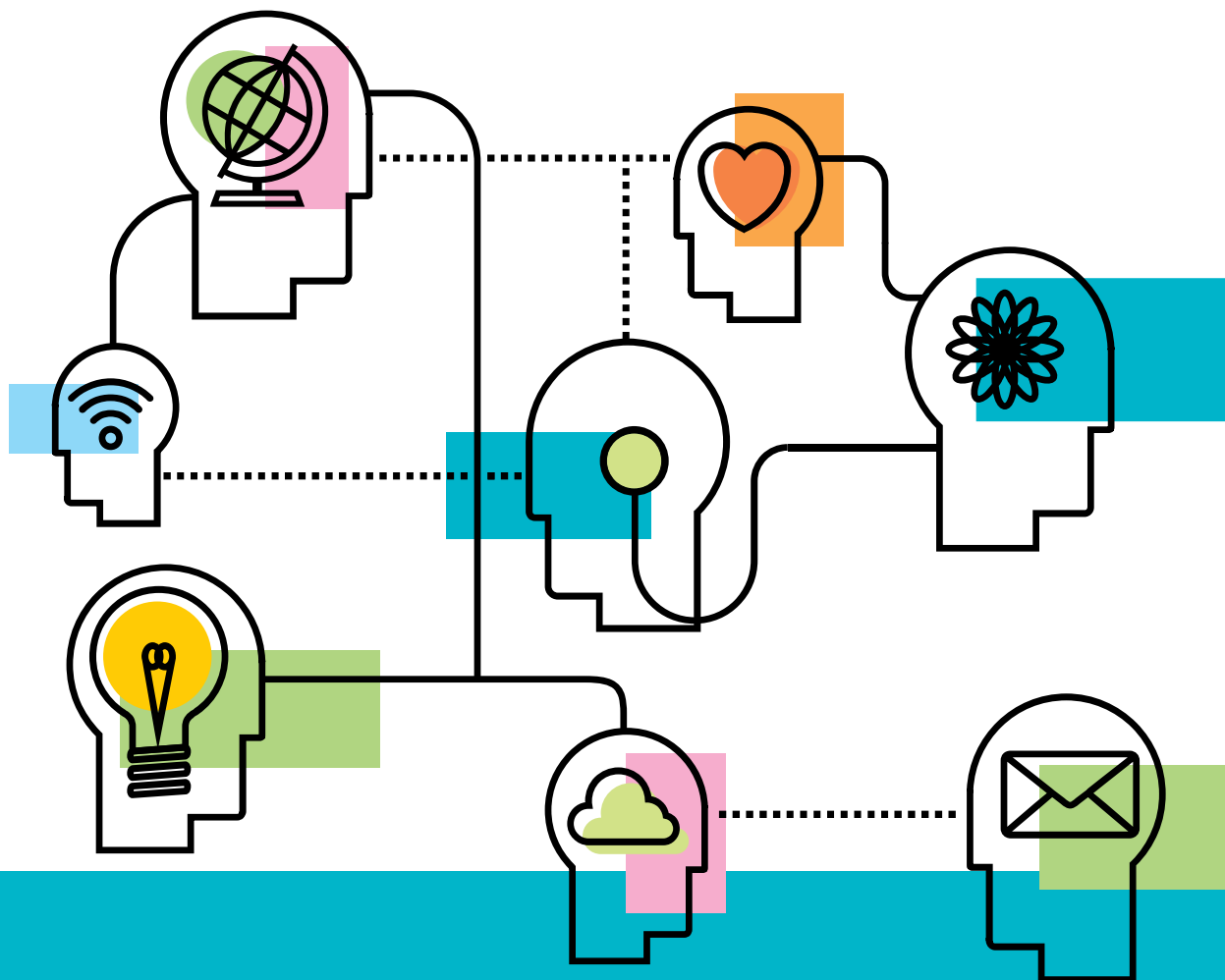
So stop consuming the same leftovers along with the tainted sauce of guilt. Take a new course of forgiveness and connection. According to Paul Boese, “Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.”⁸

Reframe the Leftovers

Recast the hurtful experiences of the past, making them a source of strength and wisdom. Find your

connection to sickening failures and disappointments. This causal mental stance will recast you from a victim to a person of willful creation who is not immune to failure. You will be able to shift from self-pity to a gatherer of wisdom for all these experiences. Being connected to these leftovers does not imply guilt or deserved justice automatically. Simply seek to understand your role in the production of unwanted outcomes. Wisdom is the reward for such work—particularly the wisdom to know what to do the next time similar circumstances arise. Remember to be gentle with yourself. Drop self-judgement. You were born imperfect with the opportunity to learn from both successes and failures. Learning how to repeat success is much easier than reaping the learnings from failures. Adeptness in leading self is gained by learning from your successes and failures.

Reframing past hurts and disappointments is about acknowledging the difficulties of life, the frailty of human existence, and the tremendous opportunities provided by all experiences to feed the soul with wisdom. Move forward by focusing



on being on purpose, living into your understanding of why you exist. Stop working to solve the past and utilizing the profound learning that past experiences offer for preparing you for the future. Initially, you will have to apply the spiritual discipline of halting the downward spiral of the mind from rehashing the leftovers, but after some time, a new pattern will emerge that reframes the leftovers into something useful—not good for consumption but possibly useful as a biofuel. Carl Sagan captured this essential reality, saying, “You have to know the past to understand the present.”⁹

Conclusion

In summary, don’t allow painful leftovers in your soul to become a hindrance to leading yourself effectively. Deliberately choose who you are becoming, develop a personal strategic plan, and bring forth the spirit which will enable this creation. Attend to your soul, the essence of you, by addressing your spoiled leftovers and reframing the icky stuff of your past. It is not about having a Pollyannaish outlook on life, but about getting serious about your calling in life.

More Online

Go to www.asq.org/pub/jqp for two other articles written on this topic by this author—“Find Your Strength by Leading Yourself First” and “The Case for Leading Self.”

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Stephen K. Hacker

Stephen K. Hacker (hackers@tsi4results.com) holds a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering from Tulane University and an MBA from the University of New Orleans. He is CEO of Transformation Systems International, a former senior leader with Procter & Gamble and previous executive director of Performance Center.