

# Grace Judson



## The Discipline of Reflective Review

7 questions to improve  
your focus, increase  
your productivity, and  
reach your goals

*an action paper from Grace Judson*

~ empowered leadership ~



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# The Discipline of Reflective Review: 7 questions to improve your focus, increase your productivity, and reach your goals

*What would  
happen if you  
stopped being  
so busy  
and instead got  
so focused?*

*Busy* is a cultural requirement these days.

The prevailing theme dictates that if you can't answer, "I'm busy!" when someone asks how you are, there must be something wrong. You're not really trying, you don't care enough, you're not engaged with your career.

And so, of course, we're all too busy to pause, step back, and evaluate what we've done. It's enough (we think) to check each task off on our ever-growing to-do list and move on to the next item.

Funny thing, though: we get to the end of the day, end of the week, end of the quarter, and we wonder ... what did we actually accomplish? Why don't we feel better about what we've done? Why don't we feel as if we've made significant progress toward something that matters?

*Why don't we feel more successful after all that hard work?*

*Focus on what's  
**important**  
and  
**meaningful,**  
forego what's  
**merely urgent***

There are three primary reasons.

### 1. Your actions aren't 100% aligned with your goal

Especially in times of uncertainty – such as when you're learning something new, or stretching your comfort-zone boundaries – it's easy to get sucked into doing "what everyone else is doing." After all, if they're succeeding, it must be the right thing to do, right?

Spelled out like that, the answer is obviously, "No, not necessarily."

It's also all too easy to get pulled into what's known as the "tyranny of the urgent," focusing on those *urgent* tasks that aren't necessarily *important*.

When your steps aren't fully aligned with where you want to go and/or when you react to what's in your face (the ringing phone or chiming text message) instead of taking action directly focused on what you really want, you'll veer off course, spending time on tasks that don't yield the results you hoped for.

### 2. You're not entirely sure what your goal actually is, and/or your goal doesn't have heart and meaning for you.

How could you be working towards your goal if you didn't know what it was?



*Always  
remember to  
adapt*

All too easily, I'm afraid, and I see it over and over again in almost every organization and for almost every individual.

It's not necessarily a lack of effective goal-setting; instead, it's a lack of *shared meaning* about what you're trying to achieve, how you'll know when you've achieved it, and the impact on employees, customers, the bottom line, and the world at large.

As a client wrote to me recently, "I have found myself thinking about 'shared meaning' over and over again. It can be a real problem that we don't even realize."

Exactly. Lack of shared meaning is a silent but insidiously undermining force that pushes teams – and their leaders – into the massive frustration of working at cross purposes whilst thinking they're all aiming at the same target.

And yes, it also applies to you as an individual, because you don't operate in a vacuum. You have people – friends, partners, family, coaches, colleagues, mentors – who support you, and you need to have shared meaning with them if you want to succeed.

### **3. Your tactical plan needs an overhaul: it's out of date and/or hasn't adapted to changing conditions.**

You've outlined an action plan with realistic steps designed to move you steadily closer to your tangible, measurable goal.

*Put it on your  
calendar: **five**  
minutes a day, or  
**fifteen** minutes  
on Friday*

And yet you still feel like you're spinning your wheels, making small progress despite big effort.

That's because, as is often said, "No plan survives contact with the enemy."

Plans inevitably run afoul of changing circumstances, within your organization, in your marketplace, in your life.

Organizational plans put forward by leadership tend to be sacrosanct, something to be executed against without ever being verified, tweaked, adjusted, or revised. Personal plans tend to fall afoul of the same trap, as we ask ourselves ... if I change my mind, if I adjust my goals, am I actually failing?

### **Reflective review and the 7-question cure**

One of the sneaky things about being busy is that we never have time to pause, step back, and take a considered, reflective look at what we're doing.

(Unless, of course, a project has failed, in which case we have plenty of time to conduct a "post mortem" to determine what went wrong and, even more importantly, who's responsible.)

Reflective review requires discipline. Even when we know how helpful it is (almost miraculously so), it's remarkably hard to take

*Reflective, not  
restrictive;  
objective, not  
critical*

the five minutes a day, or fifteen minutes on a Friday afternoon, to complete the review process.

*Yes, I did say just five minutes a day ... or fifteen minutes at the end of your work week.*

Start by officially scheduling this time into your calendar, just as you would schedule a meeting with an important client or your boss. Make a commitment to yourself that this time is non-negotiable.

Ask yourself the following questions, and answer them *in writing*, whether in a document on your computer or longhand on paper. The *in writing* part is important: the process of writing down your thoughts creates clarity and inspires insights that you won't get if you limit yourself to just thinking about your answers.

This process isn't only for reviewing something that went wrong or needs fixing; it's for reviewing *all* activities – the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly.

Remember too that this is not a post-mortem; it's not about blame, fault, or criticism. It's about facts, feelings, and incremental steps to improvement which will, if followed, lead to greater success and more joy.

Start with some simple observations of the event and of yourself.

*The sequence is  
an important part  
of the process;  
don't skip ahead*

## 1. What did you expect to happen?

You had certain expectations before starting out of how it would go and what would happen. What were they?

Avoid the impulse to explain what actually happened or why things didn't happen as you expected. This is a "nothing but the facts, please" question: what were your expectations at the start?

You'll get to those other details as you answer the next questions.

## 2. What actually happened?

Describe how the event unfolded. Still no explanations of why or how, and no justifications; only the facts of what actually happened.

## 3. What were the differences, and why?

There are always differences between what we expect to happen, and what actually happens. What were they? Why were they?

For example, "I *expected* to spend two hours gathering information for my accountant; I *actually* got called to help with a difficult customer-service issue, so I only spent an hour on the financial work; the *difference* was the amount of time

available for the accountant, and it happened *because* there was an important issue no one else was qualified to handle.”

#### 4. How do you feel about the differences?

Now it’s time to explore your reaction or response.

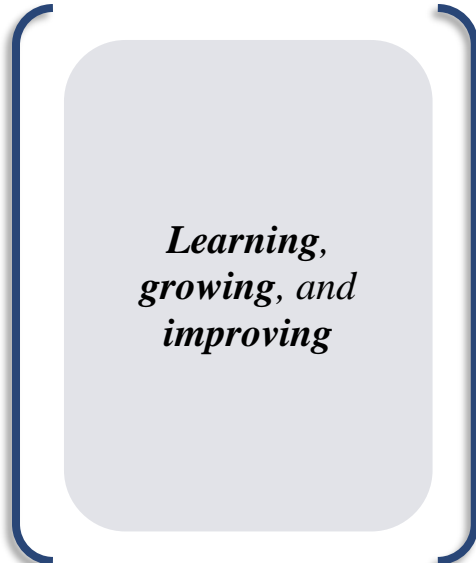
Whether we like it or not, and whether we believe we’re “supposed to” or not, we have emotional reactions to events, whether in the workplace or in our personal lives.

Perhaps something worked out better than expected, and you felt a rush of pride and joy. Maybe the meeting ended in disagreement, and you felt frustrated and angry.

Perhaps you missed a deadline, and you’re beating yourself up for being disorganized. Maybe your partner was late and you were annoyed – or maybe they unexpectedly invited you out to a fancy dinner, and you felt surprised and delighted.

Acknowledging the feelings, whatever they may be, is an important step in the process.

For example, “I *feel* really frustrated. I’m *angry* that the customer-service team isn’t capable of handling these sorts of issues.” Or “I’m *delighted* that this worked out so well. I’m so *happy* that my partner understands me.”



*Learning,  
growing, and  
improving*



## 5. What are you learning?

The first four questions are about observing the specific event or time span you're reviewing.

The remaining questions ask you to explore what might change to create improvement.


This is where the rubber meets the road; this is the real point of this exercise.

So, based on your answers to the first four questions, what have you learned about yourself and how you work? What behavior patterns do you notice? How have external factors influenced what happened – and what can be done about them? What thought patterns lead you toward being more – or less – effective in staying focused and getting where you want to go?

For example, “I’ve *learned* that I react to interruptions by getting stressed and angry. I’ve also *learned* that our customer-service team isn’t as well-trained as I thought they were.”

And “I’ve *learned* that it would be great for my relationship if I expressed my wishes – and my appreciation – more often.”

## 6. Actions for improvement



*What will you do  
differently?*

We can yearn for light-switch moments where, with the flick of a finger, the landscape changes from a gloomy struggle to a clearly-lit pathway, but that seldom, if ever, happens. Generally speaking, incremental improvement is the only way anything ever changes.

Noticing what you've learned naturally leads to noticing where there's room for improvement.

Writing down the action steps for improvement engraves them into your awareness in a more impactful way than just thinking about them.

What will you choose to do differently to improve your results? How can you influence external circumstances to create improvement?

For example, "*I will schedule* time-sensitive tasks such as financial reporting further out so that I have time to complete them without stress even if I get interrupted. Also, *I will talk* with our customer-service manager about additional training."

And "*I will write* notes to my partner on a regular basis, appreciating their efforts. *I will* be clear about what I do and don't like, so they can be more aware."

## 7. Strengths to remember

It's all too easy to stay alert for our mistakes. It's a lot harder to stay alert for our strengths, especially since most of us have been taught from earliest childhood *don't boast, don't brag, be humble*.

The brain is efficient and obedient: it focuses on what we ask it to focus on.

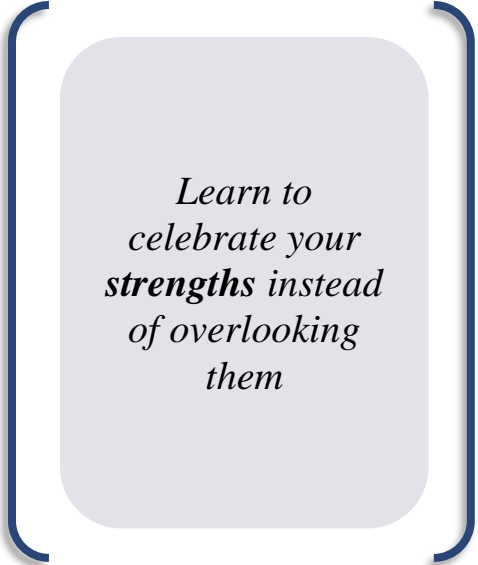
When we only notice what we've done wrong, the brain dutifully continues to notice ... all the things we do wrong.

When we start to notice what we've done *right* and how we've used our strengths – the brain dutifully continues to notice ... what we've done *right*, and how we've applied our strengths to advantage.

What did you do well? What are you good at? How did that enable, and even speed, your progress?

Even if the day, week, or event you're reviewing didn't turn out the way you expected, there will still be steps you took and ways you responded that came from your power and strength. What were they?

And if the day, week, or event was a success, what strengths did you call on to create that success?



*Learn to  
celebrate your  
**strengths** instead  
of overlooking  
them*

*Incremental  
steps create  
sustainable  
change*

For example, “I’m good at keeping my cool even when I’m stressed; that customer had no idea how frustrated and angry I was. I can also focus amazingly well when I’m on a tight deadline; somehow, I got the financials done even though I was short on time.”

Or, “I kept my temper when my partner got home late, even though I was annoyed. I cultivate patience, and that works!”

Note that this process is iterative: you select your actions for improvement and your strengths for focus, and then next time you review, you can evaluate (a) whether you followed through, and (b) did you pick the right actions and strengths, or is there another tweak to make? (Hint: there’s *always* another tweak to make!)

### What happens when you do this?

Spend a month or two using this process to review your work-week and personal life on Friday afternoon, and I’ll guarantee you’ll

- Experience a new, expansive sense of purpose and focus;
- See why you’ve been procrastinating or missing the mark on certain tasks;
- Feel better about your achievements;

*Any tool can be used **badly**; any tool can be used **well**; this is no different*

- Get lots more of the right tasks done;
- Discover confidence, pride, and joy in strengths you'd previously overlooked or underestimated;
- Realize how much you know and how good you are at what you do;
- Close performance gaps for yourself and within your team and organization;
- Develop closer, more rewarding personal and professional relationships.

### A little history

I didn't create the reflective review, although I've tweaked it to reflect what I know about people, teams, and organizations.

Back in the early 1980s, the U.S. Army developed a process known as the After-Action Review.

As the original Army training manual says, "After-action reviews [AARs] identify how to correct deficiencies, sustain strengths, and focus on specific ... objectives."

Picked up over the years by corporate executives and public service organizations such as CalFire (California's wildfire fighting agency), the process has, on the one hand, been touted as a

management silver bullet ... and on the other, disdained as just another way to produce a dust-collecting report.

The truth, as always, is somewhere in between.

In fact, the U.S. Army and other military agencies continue to use the AAR to great effect, as does CalFire, and, undoubtedly, some corporate and non-profit organizations and certain individuals.

The challenge, as with any tool, is how it's used. All too often, organizations use the process as a way to create yet another report, which then sits on a shelf going nowhere.

To be effective in creating steady, incremental change and increased focus on what really matters, the reflective review process must be iterative, using each review phase to build on previous phases.

This takes discipline, but it doesn't take much time.

## About the Author: Grace Judson



I'm a leadership coach and consultant focusing on first-line and recently-promoted managers and supervisors, helping them cross that daunting gap between being *part* of a team, and *leading* a team.

Drawing on my 25 years of corporate experience – including 16 years of executive leadership – plus 13 years of leadership coaching, I work with individuals, teams, and leaders to develop their skills, helping them become the empowered leaders they want to be – and their teams deserve.

I hasten to point out that I'm not as old as all those years of experience might indicate. After all, I started my career as a two-year-old, turning my parents' faces toward each other when they argued, wanting them to see each other instead of fighting. That was the beginning of my lifelong quest to understand what makes people tick – and what makes a good, or even great, leader.

### WANT MORE?

Download my mini e-book “The Five Most Challenging Employee Types – and how to manage them” at <https://www.gracejudson.com/most-challenging-employees/>.

Schedule your Leadership Power Profile at <https://gracejudson-calendar.as.me/leadership-power-profile>.