



Stanford eCorner

You Need a Deliberate Ritual

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Leadership educator and author Liz Wiseman shares several examples of accomplished individuals who rely on personal and intentional rituals that energize and help them maintain a fresh perspective and a “rookie” mindset to counter complacency.



Transcript

As I looked at what was common across so many of these interesting leaders and professionals, they all had a deliberate ritual, something that helped them go back to their rookie roots. This is Bob Hurley, I imagine some of you - anyone sporting some Hurley brand right now? Bob started Hurley Sports as a surfboard shaper. He built this company into this large global successful enterprise that he then sold to Nike. He is still the CEO of this company, and he described his journey to build Hurley Sports. He said at every juncture I had no idea what I was doing, and it turned out to be an advantage. And rather than tell you about the series of rookie moves, I think what's more interesting about Bob is how he maintains this playful but ferocious drive in his work. I went down to see and spend some time with Bob and you could tell he is just a playful, joyful leader. I said Bob, how do you maintain it? And he said, I have my good days. I have the days when ideas flow and I am just kind of in that sort of groove, and I have days when I'm absolutely stuck in a rut. And he said, on those days, I remembered something that happened many years ago on Huntington Beach.

So Bob began his career as a surfer. And on Huntington Beach, I don't know if there is anyone here who comes from Huntington Beach, but it sounds like a clique that's probably a more tighter clique than at a high school. And there is parts of the beach which are sort of reserved for the elite surfers. And then there are other parts of the beach that are sort of relegated to the kind of mere mortals. Now, Bob was just on the outer edge of this group of elite surfers, and he is out surfing one day kind of in the prime waves and he loses his board. And he goes under the pier to go fetch his board and on the other side of the pier he see someone he knows, it's Wayne Bartholomew. He is the reigning world champion surfer from Australia. And they call him Rabid. And he sees him surfing over kind of the lesser waves, the baby waves, and he shouts out to him, he's like... and I do come from California, I should probably be able to do a decent job of this.

And he says something to the effect of "Dude, dude, you are a legend. Like hey, come surf with us over here, the waves are like righteous, we're stoked." Or something like this, and the world champion surfer says to him, he says like "that's kind of you mate, but I like to surf over here with the kids, it's where I get my energy." And Bob said, one of the things that's helped and maintained this rookie point of view is he said, when I have those bad days, I go out and I surf with the amateurs. Sometimes, I grab my board and I literally go surfing. And he goes down to the beach not to surf with the Hurley-sponsored surfers, most of them he knows. He goes down and he surfs with the kids, the young, and the young at heart and it's where he regains his energy. And on days where the waves aren't good or he doesn't have the time, he simply walks down the hall and he seeks out the newcomers, the recent college grads, the rookies, or the people who are in a rookie assignment. And he spends his time there learning from them, and they revitalize his own point of view. This is Francois Truffaut, a French film director who before he died in his 50s, he had directed 25 films. He had this interesting ritual: as he began each film, he would go back to the bookstore in Paris where he first bought a book. When he was directing his very first film, he bought a book on how to direct a film.

He goes back to the bookstore, rebuys the book, rereads the book to remember what it was like when he didn't know how to do this. A very dear mentor of mine, Dr. C. K. Prahalad from the University of Michigan, who - this incredibly renowned management scholar, lecturer, who is this - he was a fire hazard to the university because his courses were perpetually oversubscribed, people just flocked the halls to hear him. He passed about four years ago, and at his memorial his wife shared a story with us. She had been in his office, and she found in the trash bin, she found this stack of notes, and they looked important and she pulled them out. These were C. K's lecture notes. And that evening, she says to him, Prahalad, I found your lecture notes.

And he said, thank you, but I put them there. And she was in shock, I mean horrified, I mean his most previous valuable professional resource. He said I throw them away every semester because I think my students deserve my best thinking, fresh examples and fresh thinking every semester. He threw away his teaching notes. And lastly, an entrepreneur, a CEO of an Internet firm here in the Valley who said to me when he gets stuck and feels like his company isn't innovating, he says, I go for a long walk in one direction and I don't allow myself to turn back until I've had a legitimately novel idea. And he said some day, these walks are really long. And if that's not extreme enough, he said, on the really tough days, I go into my closet and he said, now, you can't tell anyone my name. Because he goes into his closet he strips down to next to nothing, or I kind of got the sense it was to nothing. And he says, and I just think. Now, I am not in anyway suggesting you do this, certainly not while you have roommates.

But I thought it was an interesting practice because what is he shedding, I don't think it's that's he's shedding his outer clothes, he's shedding what? Audience Member Assumptions Liz Wiseman Assumptions, beliefs, practices, shedding that down, stripping down to the core so he can see things fresh. I think if I've - I've learned anything studying rookies, studying these people I call perpetual rookies, it's this: It's that when we work in our rookie space, when we're actually in our space of not knowing, it's powerful. We tend to operate at our very best. For some reason, it pulls out the very best in us. But the other thing I have learned in talking to people about what's it's like working in a space of unknown, it is actually where we feel our greatest joy. It's where we feel our most satisfied, people say, I want to be a rookie again because I felt so alive.