



Lyle's Law of Reflection

Growing up on a Midwestern family farm in the 1940s was, in many ways, a pleasant experience. There were hundreds of acres of fields and forest, creeks and gullies, hills, and valleys to explore, almost without restriction. There were animals of great variety.

Some—like bulls and setting hens—were a bit scary, but, for the most part, they were fun to be around. What can compare to a newborn pig or calf or lamb brought into a warm house on a cold spring morning?

On the other hand (isn't there always another hand?) there were some onerous aspects. Most of these unpleasant features involved chores that needed to be done on a regular schedule, irrespective of weather or other pressing matters—such as visiting one's friend at the farm over the hill. Some of these chores were not so bad, some were bearable—but barely, and some were totally devoid of redeeming features. One such was the job of “walking the corn” or “walking the beans.”

This simple process consisted of walking between two rows of corn or beans, searching for offending plants such as corn in a bean row or a despised cocklebur or but-tonweed in a corn row, and then destroying them utterly. Simple, yes, but imagine the mind-numbing boredom of walking a quarter-mile in one direction, turning around, walking a quarter mile in the other direction, turning around I think you get the picture. A terrible way to squander a day of one's fleeting youth.

On one such day when I was seven or eight, my dad and I were walking the corn when I—disgruntled, you may be sure—spotted an ear of corn that had been dropped in the previous year's harvest. I picked it up in my left hand and took a swing at it with my utter destroyer of weeds, a two-foot-long corn knife or machete. In my disgruntlement, I aimed a bit too far to the left and, instead of neatly severing the ear of corn, I peeled a not insignificant flap of flesh from my unfortunate finger. Whereupon the corn-walking ended, and we headed for the doctor's office.

For all his many faults (and who among us does not have quite a few?), my father was a wise and gentle man. When this sorry episode was finally concluded, I think he could have been excused for saying something like, “That was really stupid.” But he didn't. He just asked, “Did you learn anything from that?” This question is one I have since asked many times—of both myself and others. It is the core of Lyle's Law of Reflection: Reflect upon—and learn from—your failures and your successes.

Following a failure or a mistake—not exactly the same thing, but often related—we are prone to engage in one of two actions: castigate ourselves, or castigate someone else whom we might be able to blame. The former action might have some value if it results in an increase in humility with no reduction in self-confidence. The latter is not likely to produce much of anything useful. So you can berate yourself briefly, but self-flagellation grows old fast, and you soon realize it is time to move on. Before you do, however, exercise the Law of Reflection, and ask yourself if there is something to be learned from your recent unpleasant experience.

Such a reflective analysis will often move through the stages of what, how, and why. What happened? How did it happen? Why did it happen? The last question can be complicated but is the essence of the process. Here is a simple example.

What? My car stalled on the freeway.

How? It just sputtered a few times and then stopped.

Why? The gas tank was empty.

Why? I hadn't filled it.

Why? The gas gauge said it was half full.

Why? The gauge is broken.

We certainly learned something from that reflection, and what we learned is actionable. Fix the gas gauge.

I won't pretend that the real life problems you deal with are anywhere near as simple as that. Nonetheless, the basic principle applies. Think about it. Reflect on it. And dig deeper. Ask “Why?” as many times as you need to. If, in our example, we had



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asked the question only once, the suggested solution would have been to fill the gas tank. My dictionary says that “reflect” is derived from the Latin *reflectere*, which means “to bend back.” In a good reflective analysis we have to bend back and then bend back again and keep bending back until we understand all we can about what happened, how it happened, and, especially, why it happened.

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

While it is not always easy to take time to reflect on our failures, it is probably even more difficult to do so when we are successful. When things are going well, our instinct is to bask in the warm glow of success and then forge ahead to even bigger and better achievements. Even success, however, has a great deal to teach us.

A superficial reflection on a successful operation may lead you to conclude, “Oh, I just did everything right.” Well, not likely. And even if you did, you need to explore just what was right about those things and how you can make sure you do them right again. And rightness is relative.

As far as I know, nothing is perfect. One of the basic tenets of Continuous Quality Improvement is that things can always be better. Better to be improving on a successful program than one that is failing.



Socrates wrote, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Perhaps it would be flippant—even for Lyle—to say that the unexamined failure is not worth having . . . or the unexamined success. I do not hesitate, however, to say that either failure or success is worth a great deal more if it is

reflectively examined and the results of that reflection are used to guide us in the future.

—Lyle D. Feisel, Ph.D., P.E., Iowa Alpha '61

SEEKING DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI

TBPI seeks nominations for the Distinguished Alumnus Award! We wish to recognize members who have demonstrated the ideals of TBPI as stated in our Eligibility Code and who have fostered a spirit of liberal culture throughout their lives. Their personal qualities of excellence and leadership serve as examples so as to influence the professional careers and lives of our collegiate members.

Awardees are chosen by a committee of national officers and introduced at the Convention. A TBPI Scholarship is named in honor of each Distinguished Alumnus.

Any individual member or any chapter may nominate any alumnus member, except a national official. There is no limit on the number of nominations. The following documents in digital format must be sent to the Executive Director by April 1:

1. A one-page nomination form of biographical information and a summary of the achievements and/or contributions of the nominee exemplifying the objective of the award. (*President's Book*, C 32-33.)
2. A citation (one-page limit) appropriate for presentation, documenting the nominee's outstanding adherence to the Tau Beta Pi ideal of fostering a spirit of liberal culture in our society. It may be written by the nominating party.
3. Two letters of reference from persons (excluding nominator(s) or sponsoring chapter president) knowledgeable about the nominee's contributions and achievements.

EDUCATIONAL LOAN FUND

Since 1935, Tau Beta Pi has assisted student members with their financial needs while in school or with payment of their initiation fees through our Student Loan Fund. We are pleased to offer this service for student members in amounts up to \$2,500 per member.

Repayment is required to begin after three years, and a simple interest rate of 6 percent is charged from the day the loan is received.

Interested students can obtain promissory notes and loan applications from their chapter president, the website, or the international Headquarters in Knoxville.

\$\$ Benefit for Members

Members may be eligible for an additional discount off their automobile insurance.



This special member discount is eight percent in most states and is available to qualified members in 45 states and the District of Columbia. In addition, GEICO offers many other money-saving discounts and a choice of convenient payment plans, 24-hour access for sales, service, and claims, and a nationwide network of claims adjusters.

Call 800/368-2734 to see what savings your membership could bring. If you currently have a GEICO policy, identify yourself as a Tau Beta Pi member to see if you are eligible for the member discount.

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