



Seven Ways to Productively Learn From the Past

Look at the past as a treasure chest filled with learning opportunities for our present and future, but only if we look inside!. Here, are seven ways to open up the chest to find and use the treasure that is inside.

Reflect on it. When you want to understand what is happening today to try to decide what will happen tomorrow, look back. In order to gain value and insight from the past, reflection is a necessary first step. When we are unwilling to, afraid to, or too “busy” to look back, none of the value available to us can be found. The past begins to open its insight to us when we actually stop and look back at what has already occurred. This could be how a meeting went earlier in the day, or how we reacted to an event that happened 20 years ago. Reflection knows no time period. Your entire past, your actions, results and feelings are all available if we choose to tap into them.

Study it. Studying the past starts to feel like a history course, and it may be. Your goal however isn't to pass a test or hold a bunch of dates in your head. Rather your goal, is to place yourself in the narrative to understand what was happening and what you can learn from it. Studying in this way makes both the specifics and the context valuable. You are also building a mental file of tools and approaches that will help you make new, more informed and wiser decisions in the future.

Replay it. Replaying a situation is different than just reflecting on it. Try walking back through the situation like you are reliving the situation, but with the knowledge and perspective that you now have after the fact. This replay allows for the new perspective and knowledge to help you think how you might do something different or better the next time a similar situation happens. This is like pre-creating positive future Deja vu moments!

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Generalize it. The situation in your past might never occur in exactly the same way again. That doesn't change the value of looking back. By reflecting on the past, we can find common threads, general components of situations that we can use to create lessons and ideas for the future. This is a great strategy when looking at historical events, the lives of other people or case studies from companies or situations. Rather than looking for what doesn't apply, the way to best learn from these situations is to generalize out the lessons that you can apply again and again.

Release yourself from it. There are some things in your past that you regret, feel guilty about, or wish you would have done differently. The fact is, however badly you feel, however desperately wish you could change it, it's in the past. The page has turned. This may mean to forgive others or yourself. Let go of pain or guilt and keep (or find) the learning.

Reframe it. Reframing the past is something we can do with the perspective that comes from replaying it and releasing ourselves from it. While we can't change our past, we can reframe the situation to serve us better in the future. How you frame and use that experience makes all the difference. This isn't about denial or lying to ourselves, but a conscious approach to use our past to help us move closer to the future that we desire.

Use it. All of the reflection, study, replay, generalization and more is of only intellectual (or perhaps emotional) value until you do something with the lessons. In the end, the way to "productively learn" from the past is to put those lessons into practice now and in the future.

Good Luck !