

Journaling Can Help Soak up Opportunities

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By John Janclaes

Even the most typical of days overflows with prospects and possibilities—people to meet and follow up with, ideas to consider, resources to track down, and places to go. Journaling can be a helpful tool to soak up the day and capture all the ideas, insights, relationships, and next steps that might otherwise swirl down the drain of an overtaxed memory.



Over the 25 years that I've been keeping a journal, this practice has become an indispensable part of my daily routine—a way to record, explore, and move forward with new ideas and to chronicle helpful details. In my experience, developing a systematic approach to capture and process all this actionable data makes a big difference in where you end up as a professional.

I was at a CUNA CEO Roundtable recently and came away with ten pages of notes over two days of meetings. That's a *lot* of ideas, but what really matters is being able to apply them. You can take all the notes you want, but if there's no way to take the next step, to really focus on relevant and workable ideas, those notes remain scribbles on a page. Journaling provides a practical method to translate ideas into action, especially if you take the time to develop a system that works for you.

Here's my system: I start and end every day writing and reviewing notes in my journal, and I carry it with me throughout the day to soak up ideas, reminders, and action items. At the end of the roundtable meetings, for example, I went through all my notes and identified three "big ideas" that were immediately relevant and aligned with my mission or that of my credit union. I only have so much bandwidth, so I have to set priorities.

Some of the ideas I cross off because they're a little (or a lot) far afield, and some I might be able to return to later, especially if they connect with new ideas or information I run across down the line. We've all had the experience of reading or hearing something that jogs our memory, but that connection remains tantalizingly out of reach. But if it's written down in a journal, we can go back, find it, and complete the circuit by plugging together ideas that build on each other and might help change directions toward a more positive and productive trajectory.

In good company

The ranks of dedicated diarists and journal keepers includes some notable names, including writers such as Joan Didion, Jack Kerouac, and Mark Twain; political and military leaders including Harry Truman, George Patton, and Winston Churchill; and artists and entertainers ranging from Frida Kahlo to Bob Dylan and Michael Palin. Oprah Winfrey even shared samples from her decades of diaries online [link: <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Oprahs-Private-Journals-Diary-Excerpts>] to encourage viewers and readers to take up the habit.

Business research offers ample evidence for executives to do so: One study, reported in a June 2014 Fast Company article [link: <http://www.fastcompany.com/3031889/why-you-should-keep-a-journal-at-work>], found that employees and managers who journal are up to 25 percent more productive on the job. Writing for the *Harvard Business Review*, Teresa Amabile and Steve Kramer identified “Four Reasons to Keep a Work Diary” [link: <https://hbr.org/2011/04/four-reasons-to-keep-a-work-di>], suggesting that a daily routine of journaling can enhance (1) focus, (2) patience, (3) planning, and (4) personal growth. The authors note that Harvard MBA students taking a course on “Managing for Creativity” are required to keep a journal.

McGill University Management Professor Nancy Adler, in another *HBR* article [link: <https://hbr.org/2016/01/want-to-be-an-outstanding-leader-keep-a-journal>], notes that journaling requires business leaders to slow down and “listen to themselves” in a way that develops unique perspectives that become “an important source of creativity and competitive advantage.” Adler concludes, “Using a journal regularly will give you the courage to see the world differently, to understand the world differently, and to lead in new and needed ways.”

Practical tips from a veteran journaling advocate

There is no single, correct approach for keep a journaling, but I can share several practices that have worked well for me.

Just do it. Don’t wait for some momentous occasion or special reason to start journaling. Treat yourself to trappings that make you want to spend time journaling. I favor leather-bound journals—they represent something important and worthwhile to me—and I use a pen that sits comfortably in my hand and glides across the paper. You might prefer to jot down notes at a dedicated icon on your laptop or iPad using your favorite type font.

Make it part of your routine. I’m a morning person, so I generally get to the office before most other people. I spend that quiet time with my journal—it’s become known as “John’s cave time”—to review the entries from the end of the previous day and help set my agenda for the coming day.

I record some mundane personal things on a daily basis that help me maintain some other healthy habits. For instance, I record what I eat at mealtimes and for snacks using the BLDS acronym (for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks), and I record my weight daily as a way to support my wellness goals. I also record how many hours I sleep to make sure I’m getting adequate rest for my body and brain.

At the end of the day, I record my energy level on a scale from 1 to 10. It’s my job to manage my energy, and reflecting about the relevant factors that affect my emotional and physical reserves helps me do that. When I spend the day around people who are extroverted, bright, and high-energy, for example, that tends to provide a lift. I might record my energy level as a 10 at the end of a day like that. Another day that requires intensive conversations and weighty decisions might consume more energy and therefore rate a 6 or 7.

Another part of my daily journaling routine is to record a gratitude, something in my life and work that I am thankful for. Power and passion come from having a centered place of purpose. If my purpose is to help myself and others to thrive, it's helpful for me to recognize that I'm grateful that I get to do this and to identify opportunities that I value, such as being able to interact with energetic, motivated people in situations where I can help restore my energy and sense of purpose and work toward my mission. Focusing on that gratitude is a great way for me to start the day.

Mix the personal and professional. As you can see, my journal does double-duty as my work log and as a place for personal observations. This is something I wrote about in *Doing What Matters*: It's nearly impossible to compartmentalize your work life from your personal life. Those components of your life are integrated, so it helps to view them that way so you can better address the occasional tension between the two as something you can manage.

Become a better listener. I find that taking notes in my journal at meetings and during and following important conversations has improved my active listening and recall. The acts of recording and summarizing require me to focus on the most important messages that people are conveying. Sitting through hour after hour of meetings can be daunting, but taking and reviewing careful notes helps me to stay engaged and to identify the actions I need to take following those meetings.

Manage relationships. My journals capture reflections on interactions with others and their thoughts about personal and professional goals better than my memory ever could. It's great to see someone's eyes light up when I can say, "Six months ago, you shared this with me, and it was really important to you. And look how far we've come since then."

Every day, the people around me contribute to our organization's success, often in small but significant ways. It would be so easy to lose track of those things if I weren't recording them in my journal. I'll make a note to follow up and thank someone for taking the initiative to set up an important meeting or for making a courageous intervention during a discussion. Acknowledging those actions matters a lot to people—and encourages them and others to want to do more.

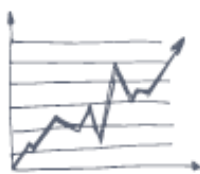
Get organized. Because my journal serves a variety of purposes, I've developed a series of icons to call attention to ideas I want to investigate further, important data, notable people I need to follow up with, and phone calls I need to make. That way I can easily see all the actions I need to accomplish as I page through the journal.



Idea



Phone Call



Analyze Data



Research Item

Build on your ideas. I don't just move forward in my journal. I go back to ideas, sketch them out, add and subtract, write out action steps and check them off, and make notes about what works and doesn't work to illustrate how a process evolves over time. That way, I can more easily trace from the beginning to the culmination of an idea. It's satisfying to see how an idea moves forward into a finished product and to be able to revisit that process of creation.

For instance, I had an idea that I wanted to build an observation deck at our ranch. I drew it up and thought about how I could build it. Then I added a materials list and kept notes about the actual construction. And now that it's done, I have a picture in my journal next to that first drawing to show the progress from inception to completion. It's really gratifying to have that record of how this project unfolded.

There is so much joy in the creative process that you can capture in real time as you journal about seeing an idea through. The mind is a wellspring of creative ideas. The challenge is in capturing those ideas and developing them into something concrete. These are the milestones of building a great ranch, or building a great company, or achieving your personal goals. And it's just fun to have a recording of all that.



Journaling the process of creating also reinforces that this is an iterative process. When I was planning the observation deck, I went to a couple places that have them. I kept notes about the things I liked and things I didn't like about their designs. And now looking back on the deck I built, I can see things I might do differently the next time—and I share those with people who ask about it. I even put together a short PowerPoint with the materials list, the key features, and things that people might not notice. I snapped some pictures and included those. Now when people ask me about the observation deck, I can share that with them, and I can also say, "If I ever do this again, I might do it differently here and here and here." It's a good way to pass along the knowledge.

Let your journaling evolve. Don't try to come up with some perfect formula right out of the gate. Let it change over time with your needs. When I look over my 25 years of journals, I can see how my habits have changed radically. When I started, I wrote long narratives. Now I'm more likely to sketch out an idea with notes along the side. And I use more of a methodology for organizing my notes, labeled with icons, so I can go through and see at a glance what needs to be done. It's easy to follow—and it's all mine. You will find your own path, your own habits—and your own treasures in journaling.

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