



LIBBY WAGNER  
Professional Leadership Results, Inc.

Helping you align your people with your vision



## Leaders Look Forward and Back:

How will you make the most of where you've been?

**When I was growing up, our family met for dinner every night and said "grace." Typically, this consisted of rushing through the perfunctory blessing: *godisgreatgodisgoodletusthank himforourfoodamen*. Occasionally, when my dad was quirky and irreverent, he'd shout out: "Rub-a-dub-dub! Thanks for the grub! Yay, God!"**

As we grew older, grace at regular meals didn't change much, but at Thanksgiving, the blessing was longer and included remembrances of those we loved or more lengthy, thoughtful demonstrations of gratitude. Last year, the Wagners gathered in Southern California at my paternal grandparents home, now mostly empty as my grandfather is gone and my grandmother Mary resides in an assisted living facility nearby. We strung together banquet tables and created makeshift centerpieces and passed around the potluck dishes. Someone (okay, it was probably me) suggested that we go around the long table, filled with in-laws and cousins and nieces and parents, and share what we were thankful for. If only I'd had a camera on Grandma's face when cousin Brett suggested he was thankful for witnessing part of 98 year-old Mary Wagner's "century!" It's almost a cliché to imagine that century, to reflect on a nonagenarian's lifetime of change and witness.

### Grace and Reflection

You may be thinking that the time for thankfulness—grace—has passed along with the turkey leftovers and that extra five pounds you are trying not to commit to for the holidays—when actually, now, at the end of the year, it is the *perfect* time for two things—grace and reflection.

Yes, the New Year is just around the corner and who knows what it will bring, but beginnings also signify endings, and often the leaders with whom I work are so caught up in their present commitment to fire-fighting and getting things done that they forget a simple, yet significant practice that can make them more effective, more successful as they move forward.

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

**Step 1: Set aside some time for yourself.** Sounds counter-intuitive, I know, here at the end of the year, the quarter, in the midst of the holiday season, to think about even a smidgen of time to yourself—however, the options listed below are sure to make a difference in how you end your year.

**Step 2: Commit to three elements: physical, mental and pragmatic.** This is about the whole self, which is why the impact can be so transformational. Don't skimp, even if you choose the one with the least time commitment.

**Physical:** do something with your body and get out of your head.

**Mental:** take time to answer the two questions, listed below, in writing.

**Pragmatic:** decide what your next steps (aka action items) will be.

**Step 3: Select a timeframe that works for you.** Three suggested options are listed below—Platinum, Gold and Bronze. Pick one that seems realistic, that you can actually do. Each option contains suggestions for integrating the three elements—physical, mental and pragmatic.

### PLATINUM DAY

Take a whole day for you. Consider your whole self—this is a reflection day, so set it up so that you can actually have quiet time for uninterrupted thinking. It's not a "mental health day" which is what we used to call it when I desperately needed a day off from teaching high school students and we'd head down to Key West for an attitude adjustment. This is a day where you can be quiet, contemplative and really assess where you've been, where you are, and where you're going. You'll have to choose those things that help you create this space—maybe it's meditation or yoga, or golf or running. Maybe it's reading or writing or walking or skiing—you decide. **Do something physical to get out of your normal mental routine.** Please don't watch television or listen to music or spend the whole day answering e-mails. You are not trying to be distracted, you are trying to be fully present with your thoughts and ideas.

The point is to **answer two questions**:

1. For what in this past year am I grateful? Why?
2. What have I learned from my successes and failures that will carry me forward?

At some point during your day, you need to spend some time writing the answers to these two questions. If you must make a list, (i.e. a bulleted list), do that, but my Platinum recommendation is to write, non-stop, without censorship or judgment. This is just for you anyway, so give yourself permission to write whatever you want and don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar or sounding smart. If you get stuck, write "I don't know what to write . . ." until you do. Time yourself for 15 minutes on each question.

Finally, at the end of your day, **identify 3 pragmatic goals** for the new year: they can be related to any aspect of your life, just something that is important for you to move forward on, something you want to commit to. My mentor, Alan Weiss, says to move 3 things forward a mile rather than 100 things forward an inch. And, this isn't about setting New Year's resolutions—this is committing to three things that you have already begun—through your own gratitude and your own learning—that you are willing to carry forward and/or change.

Finally, **end your day with some sort of reward**—pick one that doesn't cost much money—do something that you rarely get to do, or enjoy—and take time to act on your inherent worth—you deserve a reward! Walk your dog. Read fiction. Watch a movie. Call a friend you haven't had a good conversation with. Take your kids out for ice cream—something that you know you'll enjoy, not something that feels like an obligation.

### **GOLD HALF-DAY**

Make arrangements to take a half-day off work or set aside a half-day that's completely yours—use your best time of day—mine's in the morning, so it wouldn't do me much good to take off at noon and expect to get much solid thinking out of me in the waning hours of my energy. You pick what works for you. Use the same three elements from above—physical, mental and pragmatic—and take some time to complete the exercises.

My suggestion is to do something physical first—to clear your mind and either set the state or disengage from whatever you might have been doing right before—sleeping or the first part of your day. Make sure not to leave this part out, though, because the energy, the movement, the changes on a cellular level will help you clear your mind and aid your focus.

Answer the same two questions as above, and use the writing suggestions. End the time with 3 pragmatic commitments to yourself and a small reward.

### **BRONZE HOUR**

If a day or half-day seems too overwhelming in terms of a commitment, give yourself an uninterrupted hour—no phones, no computer, no calendaring, no meetings. Begin your hour by taking a couple of deep, deep breaths, close any distractions, like books, files, papers, etc. and give yourself a clean desk (ask me about my laundry basket solution, if you haven't seen your desktop in a while). If you can comfortably write by hand, rather than using a computer, use a journal or some plain paper to answer the two questions, 10 minutes each, and time yourself (I use a digital kitchen timer for this.)The physical act of writing by hand is different from using a keyboard, so change your physiology for a few minutes and shake up your brain processes, too. Complete the exercise and when your time is up, get up and stretch, breathe deeply, touch your toes, spread your arms out wide.

### **A Common Obstacle to Growth and Success!**

Leaders do not take enough time for reflection and learning. They are so often busy with their massive to-do lists and triple-booked meetings and the incessant buzz of the Blackberry. You cannot learn that way—you cannot grow. Entrepreneurs are the worst culprits of this because they often believe that it is ALL up to them—and the rest, the work that Stephen Covey calls "Quadrant Two" work (that which is important but not urgent) falls to the wayside. If you don't take charge of your own learning and reflection, who will? You must facilitate this for yourself—and you're worth it!

### **My Thanks!**

Let me take a moment to express my gratitude to you—clients, friends, workshop participants and curious onlookers—for helping me learn and grow and allowing me to contribute to your development as leaders. In a fully integrated life—a life that includes work, family, relationships, friendships, intellectual endeavor, spiritual understanding, creativity, and our physical selves—we are always learning, we are always inventing and reinventing ourselves. I am honored we are able to learn from one another—thank you! ❖

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