
The Epitaph Question



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Thinking about how you would like to be remembered can be a catalyst for radical change.

It's said that Alfred Nobel made the decision to establish his famous prize after his brother died in France and a French newspaper, mistakenly believing it was him, published the epitaph: "The Merchant of Death Is Dead."

Although we all know about the Nobel Prize, what many may not know is that Nobel made his fortune from the invention of dynamite. To Nobel, the epitaph was a harsh reminder of how he would go down in history. No wonder he was horrified. Shortly after this eye-opener, in a bid to rehabilitate his name, he changed his will, donating most of his fortune to the Nobel Foundation. His memory now lives on, not as a merchant of death, but as an advocate of peace and progress.

This anecdote begs the question, how would *you* like to be remembered? What would *you* like to be your epitaph? The reason I pose this question is that thoughts about our legacy can influence our life's trajectory. Consciously or unconsciously, they impact our life's choices.

A tribute to life

An epitaph (meaning literally in ancient Greek “*on the grave*”) is a memorial statement, most commonly inscribed on a tombstone or read as part of a funeral oration, to pay tribute to a deceased person, or to remember a past event.

Walking through a graveyard recently, I was struck by the often rather generic nature of so many epitaphs. Some of the more typical ones were “rest in peace” “always in our thoughts, forever in our hearts” or “a long life well lived”. Truly memorable ones such as “Excuse my dust” (Dorothy Parker), “I told you I was ill” (Spike Milligan), or “I knew if I stayed around long enough, something like this would happen” (George Bernard Shaw) are few and far between.

The epitaph question

Early in life, reflecting about our epitaph is not something that is top of our minds. But as we get older, thinking about the kind of obituary or epitaph we would like to leave becomes more prominent. We begin to realise the importance of living on in the hearts of the people we leave behind.

In my experience, the epitaph question is a very enlightening way to obtain a long-term perspective on an individual’s life – to zoom in on what is most important. It pushes you to think about the kind of person you would like to be.

By forcing yourself to focus on the big questions, you may obtain greater clarity about what really matters in your life.

Over the years, as part of career exploration in the various leadership development programmes that I run, I have asked executives what they would like to read on their tombstones. What would they like people to remember them by? And, keeping these thoughts in mind, what may be missing from their life?

Not surprisingly, when thinking about their own epitaph, many executives struggled to find a response. But after some hesitation, some of the more recurring answers I received have included the following:

- I’d like to be remembered as a wonderful parent, a thoughtful spouse, a caring sibling or friend.

- I'd like people to say that I made a positive difference in their lives – that I was their source of inspiration.
- I'd like to be remembered for standing up for those unable to do so for themselves.
- I'd like to be remembered for my sense of humour, my ability to make others laugh and make them feel good.
- I'd like to be remembered as someone that lived life by my own rules, not afraid to take risks – a person able to follow my own path.
- I'd like to be remembered as a person who always stuck to my values – being always true to myself – never being a fake.
- I'd like to be remembered as someone who always made the extra effort in everything I did – who tried my best.
- I'd like to be seen as someone whose leadership qualities and successes were driven by compassion, affection and ambition for others.
- I'd like to be remembered as someone creative and imaginative – who advanced the knowledge in my field.

What's clear from these comments is that we're not going to be remembered for how much money we earned, our jewellery, the size of our homes, or the type of car we drove. Our enduring legacy is what we do for others. To quote Albert Einstein: "Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile." Executives will do well to keep this observation in mind.

A catalyst for radical change

To have a fitting epitaph, you need to be the best version of yourself. This means making a difference in other people's lives. How you want to be remembered is how you ought to live your life. Reflecting now on the kind of epitaph you would like to leave (as was the case with Alfred Nobel), may propel you to make radical changes in your life.

Your time is limited, so don't live a meaningless life. Live a life worth remembering.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/epitaph-question>

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