Capital Idea #45

How visualizing the future helps people tackle difficult tasks

Thinking about their future selves puts people in a more rational state of mind

- People see their past and future selves differently, which could help them perform better at certain tasks, according to research by Chicago Booth’s Ed O’Brien. For example, when faced with a daunting assignment—such as finishing a big project at work—thinking about their future selves could improve their ability to persevere through the project.

- People think of themselves at different points in time largely in terms of two values: rationality and emotionality. O’Brien finds that people tend to perceive their past selves as more emotional and less rational than they are in the present—yet they predict that their future selves will be more rational and less emotional (see chart).

- Bringing to mind past or future selves can alter one’s behavior in the present. In one experiment, those who were asked to evoke their past selves performed better at more “emotional” tasks, whereas those envisioning their future selves were better at more “rational” endeavors.

- Just as conjuring a future self could make one better at rationally oriented tasks, thinking of the past could help maximize the pleasure of emotionally enriching experiences, O’Brien argues. For instance, when trying to enjoy a relaxing weekend, thinking about the past may help, but thinking about the future may backfire.

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